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DON SOMBRERO, the California Road Gent;

Or, THE THREE MEN OF MOUNT TABOR.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "THE LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.



STRAIGHT AND TRUE THE LASSO WENT THROUGH THE AIR, AND AS IT SETTLED OVER THE HEAD OF THE FOREMOST DON SOMBRERO IT
TIGHTENED, AND IN A MOMENT MORE HE WAS PLUCKED FROM HIS SADDLE AND HURLED TO THE GROUND.

Don Sombrero,

THE CALIFORNIA ROAD GENT;

OR,

The Three Men of Mount Tabor.

BY CAPT. MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "LADY JAGUAR," "YOUNG KENTUCK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AMONG THE OUTLAWS.

THE traveler who chanced upon Jason Baxter's hotel at the date of our story, would find it a very plain and unpretentious building even for California, and, at first sight, he would wonder how its proprietor managed to get a living out of it, but when he reflected that it was directly on the road to the gold-mines of Mount Tabor, he would be likely to change his opinion.

Baxter, a shrewd New Englander, had thought of all this before he erected his house, and the subsequent rush of trade had justified his expectations.

Nature had furnished abundant ornament before the house was thought of, and, once built, it nestled among a cluster of handsome trees which almost reconciled one to the absence of architectural beauty.

The night on which we open our story was dark and gloomy, the clouded heavens presaging speedy rain, but, even then, the cover of the trees seemed to have an attraction for at least one of the guests of the hotel, for he was strolling about where they grew the thickest, smoking a cigar, but in a way which showed he was deep in thought.

He threw away the weed, at last, with an impatient gesture.

"The stuff has lost its charm. I am as restless as ever, and I may as well fight it out as to waste my ammunition. I thought I was free from this weakness of the flesh, but the situation is, perhaps, one to make nervousness excusable. I am almost at my journey's end, and then begins a work which will try my mettle. At times, I falter and find that I have a conscience, but when I think of my cause for work I shut my eyes and go on. What will be the result? Only time can tell, but I have much to dare and I am just as likely to get a bullet in my precious skin as to bring my enemy to the dust."

Reflecting thus, he paused under the cover of a tree, with the drooping branches shutting him in as by a curtain, and remained for some time in deep thought.

He was aroused by the sound of voices, and, as they seemed to be approaching his cover, he instinctively laid his hand upon the revolver in his belt.

"Bah! I am a fool!" he then muttered. "There are desperate characters enough about here, but these men probably belong to the hotel and will pass without seeing me."

He stood still, but the previous speakers, who proved to be two in number, paused when directly beside his cover.

"We are safe to talk here," said one. "Now, what luck? He stopped at the hotel, of course?"

"Yes. He stayed long enough for supper and then rode away," the second man answered.

"You are sure of the man?"

"Certainly, captain. I knew him at once by the description, and then I heard Baxter call him by name."

"That settles it. Did he see you?"

"I suppose so; but, as he took no apparent notice of me, I can't say positively. Baxter urged him to stay over night, for fear he might encounter San Antonio's outlaw band."

"Ha! ha! Well, what said the ranchman?"

"That he was not afraid of San Antonio, but it was in so indifferent a manner that I am sure he thought there was no danger of such a meeting."

"I'll show him; and perhaps he won't sneer the next time he hears my name mentioned. Did you see any signs of his money?"

"No. He showed only that with which he paid his bill to Baxter."

"Of course he is too shrewd to do more, but I know he has it, and we will soon be on his track. Was he armed?"

"Yes. There were two revolvers in his belt, and he looked well to them before he rode away."

"That was sensible. Well, we mustn't give him too much of a start, so we will away at once and get the boys. We can ride him down in a short time."

They walked off toward the public road, leaving the chance listener once more alone.

"Well!" he muttered, "I have run upon a pretty web of iniquity, and no mistake. This San Antonio, as he calls himself, intends to pounce upon some traveler and relieve him of his money, perhaps of his life. A very pretty scheme, and one which seems likely to work well for him if no one upsets it, and there is no one except myself to do the deed. I'm half in-

clined to take a hand in the game. I've come to California on a revengeful mission, and if I can help a lame dog over the fence it may offset my own transgressions. By thunder! I'll do it! But how?"

He reflected for a moment and was on the point of going to the hotel-keeper with his story when a thought natural to his suspicious nature stopped him. Possibly the man might be in league with San Antonio, in which case it would be an unwise move.

"I have it. I'll simply order out my horse and then ride pell-mell after the unknown, by which course I will be able to warn him before the storm comes in the shape of the outlaws."

Having thus decided, he strode to the hotel and called for his horse, much to the surprise of Baxter.

"It's going to rain great guns," he expostulated.

"Let her rain," was the cool reply.

"But you may run afoul of San Antonio."

"Ah! And who is he?"

"The chief of a band of outlaws who have their home in the hills to the south. He lives by plunder, and the cutting of a man's throat is no impediment to his plans."

"He ain't afraid of me."

"Afraid of you? Well, I reckon he ain't; but—"

"Here is your money, my good man. Now trot out my horse."

Finding his guest in full earnest, Baxter gave way gracefully, and the former was soon mounted and speeding away on the road toward Mount Tabor.

He was well mounted on a strong, black horse, which he handled with the ease of one long accustomed to the saddle, and, though the night was dark and dismal, he had no fears for himself.

Still, his apprehensions in regard to the unknown man whom he was following were well founded. California, though a land of gold, of beauty and of rare attraction in many forms, was wild and wicked. Since the palmy days of '49, a flood-tide of inhabitants had been pouring to the Pacific coast, and, among them, were many men who had left dark records behind them in the East, and were making equally dark ones in the West.

Our traveler had never heard of San Antonio until that night, but it was enough that he was an outlaw. He must be thwarted in his plans.

There was no need to urge the black horse he rode. With a loose rein over his neck he was going at a gallop, and he was covering ground at a surprising rate of speed.

At the end of two miles the ground began to grow higher and rougher, with rocky sides in many places, and as the wood often fringed the road, the way was wild and picturesque, as well as a fit place for a robber's work.

The black horse showed no signs of weariness, and, when two miles more had been passed, his master began to look for the unknown. Unless he had gone faster than seemed probable, he must be near at hand.

His calculations proved to be correct, for a sudden curve in the road as suddenly showed him another rider just in advance, and he moderated his pace as he went toward him.

The unknown was riding at a moderate pace, and the pursuer saw him turn his head and look keenly backward as he approached.

"He is wide-awake, and, maybe, thinks I am a road-agent. I'll soon relieve him of his apprehensions."

Then, checking his black horse still further, he nodded pleasantly and said:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I think you are the man for whom I am looking. Are you not lately from Baxter's Hotel?"

"I had supper there," was the quiet reply, while the speaker continued his close regard.

It was a mutual exchange of searching glances, but the darkness made any correct estimate of face and character out of the question. The owner of the black horse saw that his new companion was well dressed and heavily bearded, but that was all he could tell.

"Exactly," he said, after the stranger's answer. "Now, if you are the man I seek, you were warned before you left that there was danger from one San Antonio, a robber."

"Yes, sir." "Well, I am inclined to think it would have been better if you had heeded that warning."

"Why so?" "Because San Antonio is on your track."

"Is that so?"

The stranger was looking keenly at his new acquaintance, and the latter could not but see that he was not yet ready to implicitly believe; but it was a wise measure of precaution and could not be blamed.

He briefly related all he had overheard in the grounds of the hotel, and the older man showed more animation.

"If such is the case, and there can be no doubt of it, I shall have to be on my guard. I thank you very kindly for your interest and trouble, but the outlaw is mistaken in thinking I have any amount of money with me. I own property at Mount Tabor, and he has taken it

for granted that my visit West was to draw funds from the bank, I suppose."

The owner of the black horse was not deceived by this statement, but he rather admired the man's caution. If he had acknowledged that he carried a large sum of money in his pocket, he would have been too childlike a creature for California air.

"Do you propose to keep straight on?" he asked.

"I see no other way. There are no houses in this vicinity, and I do not care to take to the woods."

"Then, if the outlaws appear, we must either run or fight."

"That is all we can do. I say 'we,' for, from your own expression, I judge that you intend to keep on with me."

"To turn back would be to run straight into San Antonio's men. Yes, I'll go on."

They increased their pace and rode for half a mile where rocky ridges for the most part hemmed them in, and the intervening spaces were thickly wooded.

The younger man was scarcely at ease. The horse of his companion did not seem inclined to move rapidly, and he began to apprehend that if San Antonio was really following he would overtake them before a refuge was reached.

His occasional keen glances to the rear at last bore fruit, for he suddenly turned to the other man.

"I believe they are coming, sir," he quietly said. "Rein in your horse and listen."

They paused, and both could plainly hear the clatter of hoofs.

"Half a dozen of them, I should think," said the younger man, "and, beyond a doubt, the outlaws. We have failed to ride them down—what now do you propose?"

"We must take to the trees," said the other, a little anxiously, but still calmly. "We will ride into the cover and let them pass."

A little beyond they saw a wooded depression, and they spurred forward with increased speed, but they had gone only a few yards when a line of horsemen suddenly appeared in their path.

CHAPTER II.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

THE fugitives pulled in their horses suddenly, for, though the strangers might be honest men, they had an ominous look as they sat grimly on their horses in a line which barred the whole road, and both of the former had instantly suspected that they were allies of San Antonio.

They heard, too, the clatter of horses' feet close in the rear and knew there was no time for delay, but, at that moment, one of the men in front spoke in a quick, sharp voice:

"Hold on there!" he commanded. "We want you, judge."

"Who are you?" demanded the elder fugitive, his voice like that of a gladiator at bay.

"A highwayman, at your service, and one of Captain San Antonio's stars. We want your money, judge, before you pass."

The man thus addressed felt a touch on his arm.

"We must charge through them," said his companion, grimly. "Now, together!"

They were men to move promptly, and the start was made almost as soon as projected. Their horses leaped forward, and the younger of the two swung his revolver aloft.

"Out of the way!" he shouted. "Draw off, or out go your brains!"

It was a plainly-spoken warning, but the foe seemed in no haste to obey, and the judge, who knew the manners of California pretty well, decided that a revolver would furnish the best argument.

He pulled the trigger, but only a click followed. It was the first time he had ever known the weapon to miss fire, and he raised the hammer just as the moment of collision arrived.

The black horse's master had one of the robbers covered, but at that moment the judge's animal, excited by scenes new to him, made a bolt to the left and plunged into the bushes like a flash.

A harmless shot followed him from the nearest man, and a moment later the fellow was almost unhorsed by the rush of the black horse, which had been promptly urged after its mate by the stranger, who was resolved to stick to the judge.

As he passed, he leaned over and knocked the robber out of his saddle by a blow from his revolver, and, in a moment more, he, too, was within the bushes.

All this had occurred very quickly, but not quick enough so that the outlaws had no chance to do any shooting. Their failure to do so, indicated that they did not wish to harm their quarry.

Just then the party from the west reached the spot, and, as had been expected, it was San Antonio who rode at their head.

"Where is the judge?" he demanded.

"In thar," answered one of the men, pointing to the bushes.

"Why did you let him gain cover?"

"His hoss made a bolt an' we had ter let him

go or shoot him. There is another galoot with him."

"Pursue and capture both," the leader tersely commanded.

In the mean time, the judge's horse had taken him some distance into the wood before he could be subdued, a fact not particularly displeasing, and even when he was controlled his master was half inclined to go on.

The arrival of his unknown friend at this juncture was an agreeable event.

"Bravely done, judge," said the latter, laughing. "Your trained steed, or untamed charger, whichever is correct, has won for us the first move in the game."

"The outlaws are coming. Do you hear them?"

"Yes, but it will not be easy to find us in the darkness and thick undergrowth. What do you advise now? Is it flight, or hide-and-seek?"

"I hardly know," the judge answered, in perplexity.

"What is the nature of the wood to the north?"

"It is like a chaparral, and would take us into a country both wild and rough."

"I reckon our best way is to double on the enemy."

"Can it be done?"

"It can be tried. They don't count over a dozen, and, in this labyrinth, we ought to be able to evade them. The only danger is that our horses will betray us. See here! They are coming fast, and I propose we get behind yonder thicket and let them pass, if they will. If discovered, we must fight."

The last idea was not a pleasant one, but the coolness of the stranger impressed his companion greatly and he promptly agreed.

They sought the shelter of the thicket, and none too soon. The sounds of pursuit had grown near, and the crashing made by the horses was spiced with oaths from the robbers as their flesh was lacerated by the thorny bushes.

"Don't let your horse bolt again," cautioned the stranger, "I think we will be all right if no new complication arises."

The judge was not so sanguine, but there was no time for further words. The pursuers were nearly abreast the thicket, and the fugitives kept a tight rein on their horses and waited the result.

It was a moment of unpleasant suspense, but the outlaws rode slowly past, cursing as they went, and seeming to be more interested in dodging the bushes than in their search.

"There is plainly a boom in our favor," whispered the stranger. "Wait a minute and then, bol for the road. These fellows are bunglers at their business."

"I reckon you are too much for them," the judge answered, admiringly.

They waited until the pursuers had receded somewhat and then rode from the cover of the thicket and started toward the road.

"We are liable to run afoul of some straggler," said the younger man. "If we do, fly low and let me size the varmint, before we proceed to extremities."

His suspicions proved well-founded, for they had gone but half the way to the road, when a voice hailed them from the darkness. The astute stranger recognized San Antonio, by the sound, but his words were reassuring.

"Have you seen a sign yet?" the outlaw asked.

"Nary sign," was the reply, so promptly and uncouthly given, that the judge was surprised and delighted anew.

"I'm afraid they will make a *detour* and gain the ridge to the east. Ride that way, you two, and don't leave the road until I see you myself. The old rascal must not escape."

The stranger answered in the same disguised voice, and then they rode on, passing within twenty feet of San Antonio.

"That was a close call," muttered the judge, as they receded.

"He must be a one-horse road-agent," chuckled the other. "I could do better, myself. So we are to guard the road at the top of the ridge? Bet your boots we will, if we can get there, but we are not yet out of the woods."

"The road is not more than a hundred feet away."

"And I reckon the way is clear."

It was a natural surmise, but as they were about to emerge from the bushes, a man suddenly arose in their very path.

"Who goes thar?" he suspiciously asked.

"Friends," the stranger quietly answered, holding his revolver ready.

"Friends be durned! Call your names, or I'll shoot. Cuss me if I don't think you're my meat, if it is dark."

"Nonsense! Take a squint at my face, old man, an' see what a fool you are."

The fellow leaned forward, but instead of the desired look, he got a blow from a revolver-butt, which sent him in a heap to the ground, where he lay without motion.

"Time!" said the victor, derisively.

"He is insensible," said the judge. "Let us go on at once."

They did as he said, and as no more foes appeared, soon left the dangerous locality behind.

The judge thanked his ally warmly, adding that he would be pleased to take him to his home in Mount Tabor, but the invitation was politely declined.

"I ride with you a mile further and then take the road to the south."

"But, surely, you will call at Mount Tabor soon and let me entertain you?"

"I may at some future time, but business calls me elsewhere now."

"I shall be pleased to see you at any time. Pardon me, but the darkness has not allowed me a fair view of your features, and I should not be likely to recognize you if we should meet again. If you would give me your name—"

The judge hesitated, politely, and the other quietly said:

"It is Thompson, sir."

"Thanks. Now, when you come to Mount Tabor, you have only to ask for Edwards Austin and any one will—"

The speaker paused as his ally started violently and faced him squarely.

"Whom did you say?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"Judge Edwards Austin is my name and title. Have you heard it before?"

The stranger hesitated before replying, and, had the darkness been less pronounced, the judge would have seen that his face was working strangely. The emotion soon passed, however, and his voice was calm when he spoke.

"I have been told that the largest ranch of Mount Tabor is owned by a Judge Austin."

"I am that man," said the pleasant answer.

"Well, very likely I will call on you at some future day."

Austin was plainly pleased at the answer, and, when the diverging road was reached, he said good-by with a repetition of his invitation; but his ardor would have been checked could he have seen the look which followed him as he rode away.

"Now, by all the gods of war," said Thompson, aloud, "this is most wonderfully strange. I have saved the life of a man I have myself sworn to kill, and not even his invitation shall turn me from my purpose. But I will call on him just the same, though in a way for which he will not be prepared. I will call when he least expects it, and my way of doing business will not please him."

Forgetful of the fact that the men of San Antonio's band might at any moment appear, Thompson sat still on his black horse and scowled after the unsuspecting ranchman.

"So that was Judge Edwards Austin, the man for whom I have crossed wide acres of land, but not to serve. I have sworn to destroy him, together with his family, and I will keep my vow. He will probably treasure the name of Thompson, but, if I was to whisper my real name he would be astounded. I am sorry I have met him, for, dark as it is, to-night, he may recognize me when I appear in Mount Tabor."

He started his horse and rode leisurely away toward the south, but his thoughts were still busy.

"The road-agent business seems to flourish in this locality, and I am half-inclined to try it myself. I must make a raise in some way to support myself, and, since I am about to plunge into crime, I may as well make a clean sweep of it. I think that by assuming a big Mexican hat and cloak I can so well hide my identity that no one will know me. Then I can prance around and raise a row whenever I choose, after which I will sink into my proper sphere and no one suspect I am leading a double life. By my life, I'll do it, and, unless Judge Austin succeeded in sizing me better to-night than I think he did, my path will be one of roses. At least, I'll hope for it."

CHAPTER III. THE MASKED RIDER.

THE town of Mount Tabor was not a large one, but it had many features which bade fair to make it well known at some future time, and what it lacked in size was made up in activity and local pride. We have called it a town, but the Mount Taborites never mentioned it as such; to them, it was a city, and, as it had a mayor, perhaps we ought to go with the tide.

It had been named after one of the mountain peaks directly to the east, and was an outgrowth of the discovery of gold in the foot-hills. When mines began to be worked, the "city" sprung up, and a good business was done in furnishing supplies for the wielders of pick and cradle.

In the course of time, sundry people awoke to the fact that the level fields around the place would furnish fine grazing and agricultural lands, and at the date of our story many ranches were to be seen here and there.

Compared with other mining places, Mount Tabor was not a hard city. True, there were desperate characters there, men who would not hesitate to cut one's throat if money was to be made by it, but the law-abiding element pre-

dominated, and there had never been a reign of terror, such as many places see.

The quiet state of affairs was in a great measure due to the wise course of Mayor James, a man who had made himself popular with all classes except the very worst, and he liked to call himself the father of the city. He was certainly old enough to bear the title, but, except for that, it did not seem applicable.

It was one of his pet ambitions to have law and order reign in the place, and, as a move in this direction, he had endeavored to prevail on the citizens to discard all weapons, but he had found few followers in his faith. A revolver was a very handy article in California at that day.

Still, the mayor practiced what he preached, and he was somewhat proud of the fact that he had never needed a weapon since he discarded them.

One evening, about a week subsequent to the scenes of the preceding chapters, Mayor James and three of his friends had been to the ranch of a gentleman who lived outside the village to partake of a supper given in their honor.

The hour was near midnight when they were riding slowly homeward—nearly every one went on horseback at that period around Mount Tabor—and not one of the quartette had a thought of danger. On the contrary they were in a very gay, happy mood, the result, it may be, of the wine imbibed after supper.

Conversation was running on some trivial subject—they never afterward remembered what—when, in the darkness, a solitary horseman suddenly loomed up in their path. The fact that he was in the way did not anger them, and they would have turned peaceably aside to pass, but his voice suddenly rung out sharp and clear:

"Halt, gentlemen!" he tersely said.

Halt they did, instinctively, and then looked at him in surprise. They saw a goodly-sized man mounted upon a powerful black horse, but more than this it was hard to discover. The rider wore a *serape*, or cloak, and a wide-brimmed hat which left little else of him visible.

"Do you know me?" he asked, seeing they were not inclined to speak.

"Can't say we do," Mayor James answered.

"I have the honor to be a road agent and have come to ask a loan of you. I am a peculiar man, but very systematic in my way. I'll take your money now and pay when convenient to me."

"We have nothing to loan," said James, a trifle alarmed.

"I don't expect a bonanza, but what loose change you have in your pockets. Here is my receipt, gentlemen."

The stranger exhibited a large revolver with a nonchalant air, but the quartet began to perceive he was in dead earnest.

"What practical joke, is this?" the mayor sternly asked.

"It is not a joke, my dear sir. I mean business, I am a road-agent and I have come for your money."

"That game won't work around Mount Tabor!" the official declared, an angry flush creeping into his cheeks.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I say it will work, and I'll prove the assertion beyond a doubt this very night."

"By the Eternal, sir, you shall suffer if you don't get out of our way at once. Do you know who I am, sir?"

"The fact that you are the Mayor of Mount Tabor does not chill my young blood. I had as soon blow out your brains as those of any other man. This is plain talk, and, to continue it, I will say that, though I hope you will peacefully pass over your shekels, I am prepared, if need be, to enforce my demand by the power of two sixes."

He showed a pair of revolvers and the four men began to feel uncomfortable. Not one of them had a weapon, so they were at the mercy of this cool stranger. A puff of wind had lifted the side of his hat and revealed a mask over his face, all of which went to prove him a genuine road-agent.

They began an elaborate argument but they might as well have talked to the mountain. He was in earnest, and when he spoke of the necessity of baste and carelessly cocked his revolvers, they decided to give him full sway for then and gave up their money.

"A thousand thanks," he politely said. "Now, remember, this is only a loan, to be returned at my convenience. Good-day."

They had no words which would apply to the situation, so they sat in silence as he rode slowly away. The first word was spoken as he disappeared in the darkness.

"This comes of going unarmed," curtly said one of party.

"We will go well heeled after this!" cried Mayor James, and this done with the sombrero shall pay dearly for his work."

"I say, let him go free. We haven't lost much, and I, for one, don't want people laughing at me. Let us say nothing about Don Sombrero, or whatever his name is."

It was a suggestion which struck all, even the mayor, favorably, and they decided to let the

affair go as a joke and spare their pride. After all they had said about the folly of going armed, it would look bad to enter a complaint against a man who had robbed four of them simply because they had no weapons.

"But," added James, "we will hereafter go armed like Mexican brigands."

CHAPTER IV. FORMING THE TRIAD.

"THEY will come! Men always come when one whispers the magic word 'Gold' in their ears, and it is about the only thing which will fetch 'em. Now, if I had said brass or copper to those worthy vagabonds, they would have stayed in the town all night. That is one of the peculiarities of this practical world."

The words were spoken in a gay, rollicking manner, and at the close their speaker began to whistle an air as light as his words had been and in a key not much louder.

He was a slenderly-built young man of medium size, and at first glance one would not think him possessed of much muscle, but those who had tested his mettle had been learnt a different lesson and shown that besides his strength he was so remarkably quick and supple that he made an unenviable opponent.

He was standing on a hillside which lay between the village of Mount Tabor and the mountains, and had it not been for his own words, one would have wondered why he was at the place.

Night had fallen over hill and valley, but it was not so dark but what he could see the ranches at the west and the towering mountains toward the east.

Everywhere about the region the scenery was wild and attractive, and though the majority of the residents had come there for more practical reasons, there were those who found time for admiration.

Evidently the young man on the hillside was waiting for some one, but there seemed to be some delay in the case, and he was becoming decidedly impatient when voices on the slope below were soon followed by the outlines of two human forms.

"It's them," said the watcher, with a melancholy disregard of good English. "You can tell a nigger's voice further than you can see a blind mule."

Up the hill came two men, silent now, and looking keenly at the late watcher.

"Well," said he, "are you going to salute me as becomes one of my lofty rank and ways, or will you quiver around like a leaf in a gale and wait for me to reprimand you?"

It was not the voice of a man who was angry, and the men came forward without seeming to be impressed by his loftiness.

"Pardon, senor," said the foremost; "we were not certain it was you."

"Was who?"
"You."

"Yes, I see; but who am I?"
"Caramba! I do not know," and the speaker shrugged his shoulders.

"No, sah," chimed in the second man; "we hab not de slightest idea whom we hab de honor of meetin'."

"In other words, my face is new in Mount Tabor?"

"Yes, sah."
"There are those who know me better, but I'll speak of that anon. I see you have come at my invitation."

"Si, senor. You told us there was a chance to make money, and we are always ready for anything of that kind."

"I thought so. Well, sit down, and I will proceed to throw light on the darkness of my ways."

The new-comers were both residents of Mount Tabor, and men whose chief ambition was to live with as little labor as possible, though being as poor as the traditional turkey of Job, necessity obliged them to seek more or less manual labor. At the same time, they had easy consciences, and their allowance of honesty was in keeping with the degree of danger.

These men, of whom one was a Mexican, Pablo Diaz by name, and the other a full-blooded negro, who rejoiced in the sobriquet of Major Jones, had the previous day been approached in the village by a man who had informed them that if they would meet him at a designated spot he would show them how to become rich men.

Hence this meeting by night.

"Now, gents," said the stranger, when they had gained positions of ease, "I will my plan unfold, though it may chill your very blood with horror."

"We'll risk the chill," said Pablo, who had pretty correctly gauged the man.

"Well, before I proceed, I want to know the state of your nerves. I'll say right at the beginning that there are no throats to be cut, no houses to be entered and no highway business to be done."

"In that case, count us in, senor. Where the law is easy, our consciences will never trouble us."

"Then to business. You, of course, know Judge Edwards Austin—by sight."

"Si, senor."

"Did you ever notice that there is a mound of some sort inside the lot of land inclosed with his house?"

"No, sah" said the negro.

Diaz had hesitated, but he now spoke slowly.

"I remember that, before Austin came to Mount Tabor and built his house, there used to be a mound near where the house must now stand. I had forgotten the circumstance and did not know whether it was within or without his inclosure."

"What is the history of that mound, Pablo?"

The stranger had dropped his light air and was speaking earnestly.

"That I cannot tell, for it was there when I first set foot in Mount Tabor. I have heard it said, however, that it is but one of the hundreds of mounds to be found all through the United States and Mexico."

"In other words, you believe it to have been built by that unknown people who inhabited this country before the day of history."

"Yes."

"You have seen these mounds elsewhere?"

"Occasionally, in Mexico."

"Did you ever see one opened?"

"Caramba! why should they be opened? They are merely the graves of men who died hundreds of years ago. Not even ashes would now be found."

"I am not so sure of that. Nearly all these mounds contain something or other that has defied the passage of time. Sometimes, petrified corpses are found—"

"Golly! dis chile will be excused from handlin' sick trash. See 'nuff dead folks above ground," Major Jones interrupted.

"Confound your black head! you've got me off the pulley of my eloquence. Don't do it ag'in. I'm captain here and you'll find sharp claws under the velvet hoof. D'y'e savvey, my military friend?"

"Sorry I interrupted you, sah," said the Major, smiling. "Go on, sah."

"Besides the ancient bodies, various kinds of pottery and the like are found, as well as stones with inscriptions on them which no one can read. Better than all the rest, gold is often found in these mounds, real, genuine gold. Of course it isn't in eagles and half-eagles, nor yet in the coins of any country now known, but it is made up into all kinds of vessels for the use of water or the like—I don't know what—and it lays around in solid bars."

"Pardon, senor, but ain't you 'piling it on a leetle thick?" asked Pablo, forgetting the stately English he usually used.

"Not at all, Senor Diaz; I know whereof I speak. Some of these mounds, when opened, have yielded wealth enough to make the prospectors independently rich. Just think of a camp-kettle which would hold ten gallons and all of solid gold!"

"It is rather an unpleasant thing to contemplate."

"An' mighty pleasant to handle," added the major.

"I know of a mound which was opened near the Mi-mississippi which contained a hundred thousand dollars in this form."

By this time the stranger had the closest attention of his hearers. They were men who never read a paper or knew what was transpiring, or had transpired, beyond the narrow sphere of their own observation—ignorant fellows in every way—and these gold-n pictures had excited their cupidity to the utmost.

"Senor," said Pablo, leaning forward, "do you think there is gold in this mound?"

"The only way to find out is to open it."

"I think that I understand you. We three are to open it."

"If we can."

"What is to prevent?"

"The fact that it is fenced in with Judge Austin's house, that he has a man there in the person of old Duke Dorval who never sleeps, and that a big dog runs loose in the yard."

"Why not seek the judge and offer him half?"

"It won't work. Three months ago I was inside his house as a guest for one day. It was then that I discovered the mound, and I approached him on the subject. I nearly got myself disliked by doing so. He scoffed at the idea of the mound containing gold, reprimanded me severely for desiring to meddle with sepulchers, as he expressed it, and utterly refused to have it touched. Said it was a sacred place, and all that sort of thing."

"That is bad, senor."

"Rather. Now, then, my worthy partners, I propose that we three look into that mound unknown to him."

"We kin do it easy as rollin' off a log," said Major Jones.

"No, we can't. The fence, the guards, man and dog, and the shortness of our time, make it difficult. Still, I propose to do it, and I want your aid. When we dig, three spades will do more work than one, and three men can carry away more gold than one. What say, shall we combine?"

"I am with you, senor," said Pablo.

"An' so am I," added Major Jones.

"Shake!" said the leader, putting out his hands.

They obeyed, and, still holding their hands, he continued:

"From this time we are brothers in the good cause, and we will call ourselves the Golden Triad."

"What am dat last word?" Jones asked.

"Triad. It means a three-cornered combination, or 1-ague of three, and comprises you two and myself. That reminds me, I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Horace Wilder, and you will find me at Hartshorne's Hotel in the village. Now, listen, and you shall have my plans for the future."

CHAPTER V.

DON SOMBRERO.

FOR half an hour longer the Triad remained in conversation. Since the day when Wilder had been the guest of Judge Austin, and had been so curtly answered when he spoke of the mound, he had employed his time in thinking how he could best attain his object, and, consequently, he had a pretty clear idea of how he was to accomplish his end—if he succeeded.

This plan he laid before his new allies, and then, having sworn them to secrecy, the work was done. The taking of the oath was not a romantic whim, but a measure of precaution adopted because he knew they were ignorant and superstitious, and the terms of the oath called down all manner of dire calamities in case they proved faithless to the league of three.

They arose at last, and were ready to depart.

"Will you go with us to the village, senor?" asked the Mexican.

"Not yet; I want to wander about a little first."

"Take care that you do not meet Don Sombro."

"Don Sombro? Who the dickens is he?"

"A highwayman, and a man of mystery, senor."

Wilder laughed merrily.

"I would make a fat prize for him, since I have no less than sixty-five cents in my pockets. But, is there really such a thing as a road-agent here?"

Pablo crossed himself gravely.

"There is, but he is worse than ordinary robbers. Some say he is Mephistopheles come back to earth, but I do not know. Nothing is known of him except that he rides pell-mell across the country by night, robs men when he sees fit, has a horse which no other steed can overtake, and on his head is a very wide-brimmed hat which has given him the name by which he is known."

"A very interesting customer, but I should think there were enough rough-and-ready chaps around Mount Tabor to catch him."

"They all fear him."

"Do they? Well, I don't, in the least, and I reckon I shall have to win the everlasting gratitude of the people, by corralling their patent road-agent."

"You, senor?" grasped Pablo.

"Cert. Why not?"

"He would kill you!"

"Humph! You haven't a very high opinion of me. Guess you don't know who I am. Do you remember when the New England and Californian circus was here?"

"Si, senor."

"Did you see that great moral show?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, then, you remember the man who rode sixteen horses at once, and afterward turned a back somersault over five colossal elephants?"

"I do, senor, I do, I do."

"Well, I am he. Behold me as I am, the king-pin of the saw-dust track, the greatest bareback rider since the days of Noah! They called me Hercules, the india-rubber man, then, but I have left the arena temporarily and am plain Horace Wilder. Keep it dark!"

The inferior corners of the Triad gazed at him in awe. From the first, they had had a vague idea that they had seen him before, and his assertion settled all doubts.

Whatever the man was in other respects, he was certainly a remarkably supple and quick leaper and contortionist.

They poured out their admiration freely; the major asked permission to again clasp his hand, and then he bade them good-night and watched as they disappeared in the darkness.

"So far, good," he then said, as he lighted a cigar and resumed his seat. "I have secured a pair of allies who, I think, will suit my purpose well. They are strong and not afraid of anything human, if I read them aright, and at the same time, so ignorant and stupid that, if I succeed in my work, I shall be able to secure the lion's share of the spoils."

His voice ceased and he gazed steadily at vacancy.

He was rather a remarkable man, this ex-rider of horses and elephants. Born somewhere—it is doubtful if he, himself, knew where—he had been a sailor in his youth, but striking a noted "show," when eighteen years of age,

had passed eight years in that wild and dashing life.

As a bareback rider, he had few superiors, and his really wonderful gifts and acquirements had been seen and admired in every large city in the East.

Finally, the gold-fever seized him, he journeyed to California, had enough of mining after a three-days' trial, joined a small Californian shew, and then—

It was not so much because they hoped to coin a great deal of money in Mount Tabor, as that the circus-manager had once known Judge Edwards Austin, that they came to the foothills town; but it was the first step in his great venture when the bareback rider, because of his skill, was invited to visit the judge in company with the manager.

He went, he saw the mound, and from that day the desire to open it grew apace, until it became a passion, and he had deserted the arena to accomplish his end.

Lying under the tree, he remained in deep thought for half an hour and then arose abruptly.

"I don't feel like going to bed, so I reckon I'll take a stroll around the judge's quarters. Maybe I'll get a look at the fair Viola, and then, maybe, the big dog will come out and use my flesh as an instrument for extracting his teeth."

He laughed in his careless way and sauntered down the hill toward the highway.

He was about to step through the bushes which fringed the track, but a glance in that direction was enough to bring him to an abrupt halt.

On the opposite side of the road, half concealed by the bushes, was a horse and his rider.

There was nothing in this fact worthy of comment, but it was the appearance of the rider, taken in at one sweeping glance, which had caused the leader of the Triad to halt so suddenly.

The darkness was not so intense but what he could see a man clad all in black, or some dark color, with a *serape* over his shoulders and an immense *sombrero* on his head, and it was this latter article which had so deeply impressed Wilder.

"I'll bet my boots it is Don Sombrero!" he thought. "Pablo said the fellow wore a big hat, and that would make a mighty fine tent for the N. E. and C. Circus. Is it he? If he is an honest man, I don't see why he should pull his topsails down over his nose so much, and—Ha! I believe he has a mask, too!"

The spy peered sharply through his cover, but, unable to decide on the latter point, resolved to watch the unknown for a while.

At the best, his course in hiding in the bushes looked suspicious, and Wilder began to have strong suspicions that he was awaiting to rob some one.

"This is the highway of the gold-diggers," he argued, "and, if this is Don Sombrero, I reckon he thinks he will be able to scoop in a few nuggets."

Several minutes passed. Wilder remained motionless and so did his neighbor. The only sound about the place was made by the occasional stamping of the black horse across the way.

The Triad chief, in the meanwhile, had been trying to settle one question in his mind. If the unknown proved to be Don Sombrero, and any one should walk into his net, ought he, Wilder, to interfere?

"If it should be a female," was the ultimatum, "I reckon I will; otherwise, let them fight it out."

Suddenly the sound of singing from up the road reached his ears, and, at the same moment the black rider showed sudden signs of life.

"His quarry is coming! I'll see how he does it, for I may want to play the road-agent, myself, some day."

The singer came nearer until his words were plainly heard, but they were as uncouth as was his time and tune. Plainly, Wilder was not to have the chance to play the knight-errant to a lady fair and imperiled.

"Two miners on mustangs," muttered the Triad chief, as he caught sight of the newcomers. "Now, for music!"

They advanced unhesitatingly, but when nearly abreast the strange rider, that worthy suddenly emerged from the cover of the bushes.

"Halt!" he laconically said.

They did halt, and that, too, abruptly, and, as they forced their mustangs back on their haunches, they looked and saw a horseman of formidable size barring their way, while, in each hand, he held a gleaming revolver, the muzzles of which were covering their breasts.

"Hands above your heads!" continued the rider, sharply.

One of the two promptly obeyed, but the second began to slyly move his hand toward his own weapon. He knew a quick movement to gain it would cost him dearly, since the stranger had the drop on him, but a little sleight-of-hand work might turn the table.

"Durn my cats! pard—" he meekly began, but the keen, cutting voice stopped him.

"Stop! Try to finger that revolver and you are a dead man. Once more, and for the last time, *hands above your head!*"

The miner's hands went up like a flash. He read the unknown's mettle and did not care to try conclusions with him.

"That's better," commented the master of ceremonies. "Only, mind you, you must keep them there until I give you leave to drop. If you disobey me, out go your brains."

"What in tophet are you tryin' ter do?" was the angry inquiry.

"You'll see, directly, Dick Meeker. Or, perhaps you can guess when I introduce myself. I am Don Sombrero, at your service!"

A simultaneous exclamation fell from the lips of the two men, and in a form rather too profane for repetition. Evidently, they had heard of Don Sombrero before and were not pleased to meet him.

"I see you know me," continued the road-agent, politely, "so I need not waste any words. You know my business and I know yours. You have, at the present time, a quantity of gold-dust in your pockets which you propose to risk at the gaming table in the village. You are sure to lose it if you go there, so it will be no worse to give it to me. Fork over, gents, and thereby oblige Don Sombrero, who never forgets a loan."

"I haven't an ounce of the dust," declared Meeker, who knew better than to think of resistance.

"Bah! Don't lie, my good man, for if you hadn't the dust I shouldn't ask for it. I never make mistakes. Now, since you are so quiet and lamb-like in your way, I'll advance and go through you. In the meanwhile, keep your hands above your heads."

"I haven't an ounce—"

"That'll do, Richard. We will call it you pass, and I'll make the trump forty-one calibers."

The road agent moved forward, and Horace Wilder drew a long breath.

"May I be shot if he ain't the coolest chap I ever saw. He beats the tiger-tamer of the circus all to pieces. Reckon I don't want any finger in his pie."

The miners were in a fury, but, though they were two to one, they dared not resist. In cases of the kind, where men know the power of a revolver, the victory is usually with the man who gets the first move in the game.

"I'll take your weapons first of all," continued Don Sombrero; "but, as I am not in need of such trinkets, you shall have them back before I bid you good-by."

"You dare not give me a chance to use them," the miner savagely said.

"Why should I? I could gain nothing by so doing, and I might lose a good deal."

While speaking he had deftly removed their revolvers and knives from their belts, and then they were wholly at his mercy.

"The dust of which I have spoken is in a canvas bag which you have placed in an inside pocket. I will now appropriate that."

"Look here," said Meeker, almost choking with rage, "you had better draw off. You won't find me like your former victims, and if you persist in this business I'll hev your life fur it!"

"That is a matter for future consideration," was the even reply. "We won't speak of it now. I will trouble you for the dust."

The road-agent's hand glided inside Meeker's coat and the canvas bag came to light, while the luckless miner glared his impotent rage.

"If you will look on the big rock yonder, five minutes hence, you will find your weapons unharmed. I am sorry to have troubled you for this loan, but as it is only a loan I will pay you back some day. Don't worry about the interest on it, gentlemen. Good-day."

And then Don Sombrero rode slowly away until the rock he had mentioned was reached, paused for a moment, glanced back at his victims, who had not stirred, and then put spurs to his horse and dashed away.

CHAPTER VI.

THE AMERICAN CAVALIER.

MOUNT TABOR, at the time of which we write, was chiefly noted as being the gateway for the gold dug in the foothills to the east. There had been a time when it was the only industry of the neighborhood, but, among the people the mines naturally drew there, were some shrewd enough to see that the broad acres to the west of the mountain would make excellent grazing and agricultural lands, and settlers were beginning to be quite numerous.

Two years had passed since Judge Edwards Austin settled on a choice location, and, during that time, he had made rapid strides in a pecuniary way and built up a tremendous local reputation.

He had been offered several important offices by his townspeople, who felt a species of awe for the man who had been a judge in Mississippi only a few years before, but he had declined all such honors and was so determined in his resolution to be merely a private citizen that he would not even give his opinion on law points.

The other members of his family were his sister, Octavia, and his daughters, Laura and Viola.

To avoid a possible false impression, let us say, right here, that Miss Octavia was no superannuated maiden lady—she had not, at the time of our story, reached her thirtieth year, but she had fine executive abilities and was something of a mother to Laura and Viola, who were respectively twenty and eighteen years of age.

The three ladies, born and bred in Mississippi, had at times found life rather dull around Mount Tabor, and though usually contented with their lot, they were thrown into a feminine flutter of excitement when it was known that a stranger, young, handsome and single, had purchased a lot of land directly south of their own ranch.

A house went up as though by magic, but, though the sisters, who were very fond of riding, often rode past when the men were at work, the new owner had not appeared to their vision until the building was finished and furnished.

Then came the occupants—the proprietor and three servants—and the ladies had obtained distant views of the former, whereat they pronounced him a prince of men, but his business was not yet settled in other localities and none of the Austins had had the pleasure of speaking with him up to the time when we open our story.

But, during the month since he had started the first fire in the new house, they had learned that his name was Theodore Rivers, and, to that romantic one, they had added a *sobriquet* of superior romance—"the American Cavalier."

Not that they knew him to be an American, but he looked it, and they called him thus to distinguish him from the gaudily-dressed but, to them, disagreeable Mexicans, who had endeavored at odd times to captivate the wealthy judge's daughters by a blaze of glory produced by *sombrero*, *serape* and velveteen *calzoneras*.

All this does not prove that the three young ladies had fallen desperately in love with Mr. Rivers, for the fair minded male reader knows that these feminine flutters are usually all smoke.

On the morning after the events of the preceding chapter, Rivers mounted a fine bay horse, and rode away toward the mountains.

He was as fine-looking man as ever trod the soil of Mount Tabor. Slightly above the average height, with a compact, well-rounded form, brown hair, mustache and eyes, a smooth, well-proportioned face and upright carriage—he looked handsome enough to strike the fancy of any maiden, romantic or otherwise, as he rode away on the clean-limbed bay.

He rode straight toward the Western Rome mine, and it was not long before he was among the cabins the men had erected for their occupancy.

It was Rivers's first visit to the place, and not knowing how to proceed to find the man he had come to visit, he rode toward the only person who was visible.

This was a man of large frame, who was seated on a boulder cleaning a revolver, but he was considerably past his prime and the stoop in his shoulders was in keeping with the grayness of his long hair and beard.

He had rather a benevolent look, moreover, and Rivers felt that he would receive the information he wanted.

"How do you do, sir?" he pleasantly said. "Can you direct me to the office of Mr. Winship?"

There was a pair of keen eyes behind the shaggy brows of the old man, and he seemed inclined to "size" the visitor as much as possible while he had time.

"I reckon et I kin," he answered, in a slightly hoarse voice. "He don't keep ther place no secret, an' I am one o' the galoots that walks up ther ther pay-desk ev'ry week."

"I suppose you are a veteran miner?"

"Vetran? Lord love ye, yes. Thet is, ef forty yar will make a man that. I've swung ther pick ever sence I war fifteen year old, an' I've be'n in Californy sence '49. Yes, sir, I'm a Forty-niner."

The speaker arose, placed his arms akimbo and stared at the visitor as though to impress him with a full sense of his dignity.

"Those were big days, I am told," said Rivers, who could not fail to see that his companion had only to be humored to be extremely docile.

"Big? Why, stranger, that don't begin ter express it. We seed times then—But, look hyar, I'm a-keeping you from ther boss, an' I've got work ter do myself. Some other time, mebbe, I'll give ye a synopsis o' what them days was. Ef you see me ag'in, call me Joe Pike. That's a handle I got 'cause I struck Pike's Peak es soon as any on 'em. My proper name is Smith. D'y'e mind ther shanty up ther with a red flag at ther door?"

"Yes," Rivers answered.

"Et don't mean small-pox, but thar is whar you kin find Mr. Winship. Good-day."

Rivers returned the adieu and rode on.

"I'll remember the name, for I have a de-

eled interest in these old veterans. Joe Pike! Easy to speak and easy to remember. He is a picturesque old fellow, like all the relics of '49, and I'll interview him at some future time. He may be of use to me in getting information, if I need any, and at the pace I am going I shall need a good many things before I get through with this region."

He soon reached the shanty, and, finding the mine-owner in, proceeded to business.

In brief, the property he had recently purchased included several acres of mountain land, and, the thought having come to him that there might be gold in the earth, he had come to Winship, as an experienced miner, for an opinion.

The verdict was not very promising.

"There may be pay-dirt there," said Winship, "and I'll go over it some day with you and prospect a little, but I know the boys tested the soil more or less some years ago and I wouldn't care to pay you any great sum for it."

Evidently, he had no faith whatever in the place, but he repeated his offer of assistance in so friendly a way that Rivers could find no fault.

"I am not at all surprised," the latter said, as he rode away from the camp, "but I would like to strike a bonanza among those rocks. The money would come in mighty handy, just now. I can't carry out my scheme without money, and carry it out I will if I have to turn road agent to do it."

As though an echo to his thoughts, a man who was just then passing, paused and nodded.

"I reckon you're ther pilgrim that has jest moved in down thar," he said, pointing down the mountain.

"Yes, my name is Rivers," answered the cavalier.

"Wal, I b'lieve in doin' a feller-creetur' a good turn when I kin, an' I want ter warn ye ter keep yer eyes peeled all along thar road."

"Why so?"

"'Cause I was stopped thar, last night, by Don Sombrero, an' robbed of ev'ry ounce o' dust I had."

Rivers's face changed expression.

"Don Sombrero!" he repeated. "Yes, I've heard of him."

"Most ev'ry pilgrim 'round hyar has, an' I've heerd on him ter my cost. Ef ever I git my eyes on him ag'in, out goes his candle."

"It's a hard thing to rob a poor man of his money," said the cavalier, in a slightly husky voice, and he seemed very much engaged in smoothing the mane of his horse.

"Hard! Wal, I reckon, but Dick Meeker ain't ther kind o' a pilgrim to take sech a thing without revenge."

"What do you propose to do?"

CHAPTER VII.

AN ADVENTURE.

RIVERS had raised his eyes and was looking straight into the man's face.

"Do?" repeated Meeker, fiercely. "Why, I propose ter shoot the crittur."

"He did not try to shoot you, did he?"

"No, but he robbed me, which war jest es bad."

"Do you think a man is justified in seeking the life of a fellow-creature out of revenge?"

The cavalier's voice sounded stern and harsh, and Meeker's hot blood rebelled at what he thought a reproof.

"You kin bet your hull pfe I dol!" he declared, "an' I sw'ar by all ther saints that I'll shoot Don Sombrero afore another month!"

Rivers shuddered.

"Is that the temper of this region?" he asked.

"Ev'ry time. No durned road-agent kin play ther funny business round Mount Tabor. Mark that down. But I've got ter go now. I've warned ye, an' all you've got ter do is keep yer eyes open. Ef you see Don Sombrero fire at ther first glimp', unless yer conscience won't let yer."

"Wait a moment. What sort of a looking man is this road-agent?"

"Bout your size, an' rides a black horse."

"How does he dress?"

"Wears a black serape an' sombrero, the last big enough fur a meetin'-house, an' a mask over his face."

"Thank you; I'll look out for him."

The cavalier rode on and Meeker looked after him with a scowl.

"Go your way, an' hyer's bopin' Don Sombrero will light on ye. I don't cotton ter a man that asks ef it are justifiable ter shoot a road-agent. Bet he robbed an orphan asylum ter get funds ter buy his claim over yonder."

Rivers, too, was deep in reflection as he rode away.

"I wouldn't care to have that man on my track. He would as soon shoot as to eat. If such is the sentiment of the whole country around Mount Tabor, I am in a fine country for my work. So the man thought my conscience was troubling me! He would be surprised if he knew me as I am. And he thinks Don Sombrero is about my size. I hope no one else will get that fancy into their head, for I am a stranger

here, and if they should charge me with being the road-agent it would trouble me to prove that I am not and nip my career right in the bud."

He rode on for some time in such deep thought that he took no heed of what was going on about him; but at last throwing off his melancholy mood, he urged the bay horse into a gallop and swept on toward home.

He reached and passed the place where Don Sombrero had ambushed Dick Meeker and his partner, but with only a sweeping glance on each side he kept on at the same speed. Perhaps the idea had occurred to him that it was in such places that road-agents would naturally lay in wait for their prey, but no one appeared to molest him in any way.

A little further on, passing a curve in the road, he saw first, and by mere chance, a small boy crouching behind a bush, and then, secondly, another rider coming toward him at a leisurely trot.

The small boy was not of interest, but the rider was, for it was a lady, of fine form and graceful saddle movements.

"Laura Austin!" he muttered. "I am going to meet her."

The words had scarcely fallen from his lips, when the small boy darted from behind his cover, almost into the face of Miss Austin's horse, and accompanying his movements with a sharp cry.

The result is easily imagined. Her spirited horse, aroused from his dainty steps so rudely, gave a sudden bound and then shot forward like an arrow, while the small boy, with a grin on his face, darted into the bushes and was gone.

It was very like his species; he had had his "fun" and was now anxious to quit the scene thereof.

What was amusement for him, promised to be anything else for Miss Austin. Her fine saddle-skill had enabled her to keep her seat, but when she tried to pull in her horse, he took the bit in his teeth and went like a shot.

All this had been seen by Theodore Rivers, and as the runaway bounded toward him, he saw that he had a call to make himself useful.

He spoke to his own horse, settled himself for the shock, and then, when the other animal would have galloped past, he suddenly found his rein seized in an iron grasp, which settled him back on his haunches.

The struggle was over in a brief space of time; the runaway, beholding the hand of a master, gave up the rebellion and settled into hypocritical meekness, and Rivers, lifting his hat, politely said:

"I think you will have no more trouble with him, miss."

The color of Miss Austin's cheeks was changing from red to white, and back again to red, with erratic rapidity. Bold rider, that she was, she had not been really alarmed at her peril, but now matters had assumed a more confusing aspect.

She was at last face to face with the "American Cavalier," in a situation where she could not avoid speaking, if she would; but though she had laughingly declared to her sister and Miss Octavia that she would be the first to make the acquaintance of and captivate the new lion of Mount Tabor, her courage utterly failed, when the chance to do the first was given her.

"I am very much obliged to you," she stammered, and then hated herself for being as awkward as a school girl, as she afterward expressed it.

"Do not mention it," he politely answered, "for I did no more than the feeblest man might have done."

"You are mistaken," she answered, rallying, "for it is not every one who can subdue Nero so easily when he is in a vicious mood."

"I have been a horse-tamer in my day, and I consider myself the master of any creature of the species," he said, smiling.

There was a sudden deepening of Miss Austin's color.

"I see the cause of my trouble has gone," she said, looking around.

"Did you know the boy?"

"No, and I can not imagine his object in frightening Nero."

"Purely a mischief transaction, miss. He wanted to see him run. I've done the same thing myself, but not recently. I would prove my loyalty to your cause by chastising the boy, but he is already out of sight. Pardon me, miss, but I am inclined to think we are neighbors. I am the owner of yonder estate and my name is Rivers, at your service."

"I thought as much, for I have seen you ride past my home. I am Laura, the daughter of Judge Austin."

"Then we are formally introduced," he said, laughing, "and the fact is due to the young rascal who hid behind a bush and tried to do you mischief. I thought he was Don Sombrero, when he first appeared."

Miss Austin shuddered and looked up and down the road.

"I almost expect that horrible creature to appear whenever he is mentioned," she said.

"Meaning Don Sombrero? Well, I suppose he is an object that might come under that head, but, as I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting him, I can't say but what he is an Adonis and Moses combined."

"The pleasure of meeting him! Mercy, Mr. Rivers, don't use the word in reference to that horrible man. He is a desperate cut-throat, and I should decide to give up my riding altogether, rather than to run the risk of meeting him, had not Mr. Roberts solemnly promised to hunt him down."

"Mr. Roberts?"

"The sheriff, you know."

"Oh, yes. And so Mr. Roberts has promised to catch Don Sombrero."

"Yes, and I feel that he will do so."

"Are you so thirsty for the road-agent's blood?"

"Not that, particularly. If he would go to South America and let us alone, I would be willing he should live a hundred years, but we are not safe while he is around Mount Tabor."

"Has he flourished here long?"

"Only for four or five weeks. I remember, now, that his first appearance was about the time that work was begun on your house."

"He may have come from San Francisco with me," laughed Rivers, and the subject was dropped.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MOUND.

MISS AUSTIN and her rescuer delayed for some time in conversation, but she finally glanced at the sun and declared that she must return to her home.

So she turned Nero about and they rode together at a walk. Somehow, neither cared to increase the pace, and their conversation was very cordial for new acquaintances, but, of course, they owed some neighborly courtesy to each other.

Rivers received an invitation to accompany her to the house, so that the judge could thank him, as she expressed it, but, pleading pressing business, he said he must defer the call until the following day.

"Expect me then," he said, at parting. "I have thus far been immersed in business, but I am anxious to become acquainted with the people of Mount Tabor, and I will not forget your kind invitation."

And then adieus were said, the cavalier spoke to his bay and departed at a trot, and Miss Austin rode on alone.

She did not seem in any haste. The rein was held loosely in her hand, and she was looking straight at vacancy as people only do when in deep thought.

"I have met him at last, but I would not have him know all the foolish things I have said for anything. I never realized before how ridiculous all such light speeches are. Ah! if he knew that I have been boasting that I would have him at my feet in a month's time he would never condescend to set foot in our house. The idea of my being able to bring such a man to my feet! Now, that I have seen him, I would as soon think of trying to captivate a prince. He would never give a serious thought to such an insignificant creature as I. He said that he was the master of the horse creation, and he might well have said of the human also. He was born to be a master!"

Thus soliloquized the judge's fair daughter, and then, as though ashamed of making a confidante even of herself, she started Nero into a gallop and soon reached Arcadia, as she had named her home.

The Misses Octavia and Viola were seated in their private room when she walked into their presence.

"Busy over your worsted work, I see," she carelessly said, after a glance at their pretty faces, for the three really made a very attractive trio.

"Yes," said Octavia, with assumed severity, "we have been usefully employing our time while you have been galloping over the hills like a Donna Quixota."

"In the same manner that you did yesterday. But I admire your industry, nevertheless. Still, while you have been making mats, I have had an adventure."

"With Don Sombrero?" questioned Viola, lightly.

"No," said Laura, indolently. "I have been riding with Mr. Rivers."

Down fell the worsted work, and the dainty fingers ceased their deft movements.

"Mercy!" cried Viola.

Octavia, however, looked incredulous.

"You are not forgetting that truth is a pearl beyond price, child, I hope," she severely said.

"Not at present. I came to tell you that my ride has brought about a new order of things. I have been in peril, my life has been saved by Mr. Rivers, and he is to call here to-morrow."

How she enjoyed their blank surprise—they, sitting in utter amazement, she, as calm as though she had been discussing the prospects of the crops around Mount Tabor.

She would have been less than a woman—less than human, perhaps we should say—if she had not enjoyed her triumph and her secret to the fullest before enlightening them. Then they lamented in mock seriousness that they had been outstripped in the race for the favor of the American Cavalier; but, had they become really enough in earnest to notice that she made no further boasts, they might, perhaps, have suspected that Rivers was a tamer of more than horses—the master of at least one woman.

The morrow came, and, with it, Theodore Rivers.

Evidently he had been expected, for a servant was at hand to take charge of his horse, and when he had been ushered into the sitting-room, Laura soon made her appearance.

They met without embarrassment, as becomes people of the world, and in a friendly manner, and then they fell to talking like old acquaintances, but the *tele-a-tele* was soon interrupted by the entrance of Octavia and Viola.

Later, came Judge Edwards Austin, who deserves more than a passing glance at this stage of our story.

He was about fifty years of age, but, except that his hair and beard were quite gray, he showed little signs of the wear and tear of time. Of medium height, he was powerfully built, and this, combined with a broad face full of power, served to give him a commanding air.

One could see at first glance that he was not a man to relish idle jesting. His deep-set eyes were keen and cold, the brows above them were heavy and massive, looking not unlike an *abatis* erected over a wall; the belligerent beard entirely concealed his mouth but suggested a resolute expression underneath, and, taken all in all, the master of Arcadia looked like one who would make a good soldier and act the martinet.

Still, his greeting to Rivers was cordial and kindly, and, afterward, he talked pleasantly of crops, mines and the prospects of Mount Tabor.

Through all, the nearest approach to a smile was an occasional quiver of his bearded lips, and Rivers could not but wonder that such a man should be the father of children so amiable as Laura and Viola.

The Cavalier had not intended to make a long call, but he was so cordially asked to remain to dinner that he consented.

Afterward, armed with cigars, the gentlemen went outside for a stroll.

When Judge Austin settled at Mount Tabor, he had astonished the people by inclosing an acre of land, on which stood his house, with a high, barbed iron fence, but it was, perhaps, a wise measure, since so many lawless characters were abroad by day and night, and, when they saw that the new settler was inclined to be exclusive in his ways, the fence seemed in good keeping; and, in any case, he was rich and had a right to do as he pleased.

Various tropical trees and plants had been started at the same time, so it was a very pretty wilderness of beauty through which he took his guest.

"I trust, for your own sake, Mr. Rivers," said the judge, "that you have come to Mount Tabor to remain. I prophesy that within a year you will have a chance to dispose of your property at three times what it has cost you, but, if kept still longer, its increased value will astonish you."

"Such is my idea," was the reply. "They tell me the mines are paying as well as ever, and people are just awakening to the fact that these are fine agricultural ranches."

"Exactly," Austin answered.

Just then they arrived at where an iron fence inclosed a space about ten feet square, and, looking inside, Rivers saw an elevated mound which was entirely destitute of ornament.

He glanced at Austin, wondering for the moment if it was the burial-place of a member of the family, but the bearded lips quivered in the attempt at a smile before noted.

"Here, Mr. Rivers, is a relic of far-off days, one of those mounds whose history is forever gone, whose builders perished hundreds of years ago and left no explanation behind them."

"I have seen them before, but I was not aware that we had any near Mount Tabor. Have you ever opened it?"

"No!" said the judge, quickly. "I would not permit such a thing. Once or twice I have been approached on the subject by men who suggested that treasure probably lies inside, but, to me, such a relic of those mysterious mound-builders is worth more than gold or silver. I propose to preserve it as it is."

"A very good idea," commented Rivers, but without any particular enthusiasm.

They lingered for some time about the place and the judge spoke of the mound builders in a way which showed he had read all attainable works on the subject, but had Rivers given his opinion, he would have said that he should not care to have a graveyard in his garden.

Anon, they went into the house again, and the Cavalier rode away, conscious that he had enjoyed himself very much, and determined to accept the invitation to call again.

"I wonder," he thought, as he rode homeward, "if that mound is really a relic of ancient days, or, is there a mystery connected with it?"

CHAPTER IX.

SHERIFF ROBERTS.

The following evening something occurred which made it advisable for Horace Wilder to for a time absent himself from Mount Tabor.

In the village was an institution called the Casino, which was a drinking and gambling house in one, and when the leader of the Triad sauntered in to enjoy a smoke and survey the crowd always present in the evening, a quarrel was maliciously forced upon him by two roughs, one of whom was called Ben Braxton and the other "Jonathan"—a name given him because he was a typical Yankee.

They met with a surprise, however, and were well punished by Wilder, who astonished all by his remarkable muscle and quickness. He used many tricks learned while in the circus business, and the two men found in the end that he was a sort of human tiger, despite his rather slender build.

Joe Pike, the veteran 'Forty-niner, was present, and gave moral support to the stranger, and some unseen hand had just buried a knife which cut through both of Braxton's hands, when the room was invaded by the city's sheriff and a posse of his men.

He had heard that a fight was going on in the Casino, but when he arrived no one seemed inclined to point out the guilty parties, and Wilder seized an opportunity to gain the outer air.

There he was speedily joined by his associates in the Triad, and Diaz confessed that it was he who had flung the knife which wounded Ben Braxton. Moreover, he stated that the fellow was in favor with the sheriff, and expressed the opinion that he would betray Wilder and have him arrested, relying on his friends to give evidence more injurious to the circus man than truthful.

Such being the case, Wilder decided to leave the city for a week, so he said good-by to his partners and quietly left the vicinity.

If the sheriff had learned the names of the rioters there was no immediate evidence of it, and in an hour every one seemed to have forgotten the trouble.

Abner Roberts, the sheriff, was, however, destined to play a more important part than that of a mere officer of the law in the events which followed, as Theodore Rivers soon discovered.

When he made his next visit to the Austin ranch he found Roberts there, and though the afternoon passed pleasantly enough, the Cavalier could not but perceive that his was more than a business visit.

Riding homeward, he soliloquized in this fashion:

"The sheriff seeks one of the daughters of the judge, probably Laura. Maybe he's in love, or it may be the money he covets. In any case he regards me as a rival, and, if his black looks furnish a criterion, I may yet feel his claws. Californians do not tolerate rivals, and if he could get a hold on me through the law, he would use it."

The Cavalier looked troubled, though it did not seem as though a man of his standing need fear the law, rich, noble and kind-hearted as he was, and he twisted a lock of the bay horse's mane in an abstracted manner for several minutes.

"Let him work," he finally said, aloud, "and we will see if his brains are better than mine. I will not turn back in my work if every sheriff in California is sneaking at my heels."

Having arrived at this conclusion, he kept quietly on in his chosen path. He was rarely absent from the Cactus Lodge, as he had named his new home, and every day he was engaged in some improvement.

In spite of this, he found time to visit Arcadia often, and never without a cordial welcome from all. He did not again meet his rival there, but, one day, when out for a gallop as Laura's escort, they passed Sheriff Roberts, who looked after them with a rather sour face.

"I don't like him," said Laura, abruptly.

"People speak well of him around here," said the Cavalier, quietly.

"I know they do, for he is regarded as a zealous arm of the law, but many crimes remain unpunished and I suspect a bribe would have due effect on his zeal."

"Your father seems to like him."

"Yes, and that is what troubles me."

Rivers looked at her keenly.

"Still, I suppose he does not insist on your making his friends yours?"

"He has poured the praises of Sheriff Roberts in my ears until I am tired of it."

"I suppose you find quite a contrast between him and the people you knew in Mississippi."

"There is a difference," she acknowledged.

"I do not see how you ever came to leave your old home for this wild country."

"It was my father's wish. Were you ever in Mississippi, sir?"

"I passed down the river in a steamer by night, once, but the country is strange to me."

"You could not help liking the place. I thought when we left that it was the only endurable place in the United States, but we are all satisfied here now."

He asked her many questions about her native State, and in this manner time glided on unnoticed.

He went away at last, and in a satisfied mood. Sheriff Roberts might possess the favor of the parent, but he certainly did not have that of the daughter.

At that moment, the fair Laura was thinking of Rivers, and among other things that came to her mind was the fact that he had asked her many questions of her past life. So strongly did this impress her for the time, she could not but exclaim:

"He has the history of my whole existence, and I know no more of him than his name, not even from whence he came when he settled at Mount Tabor. Still, it is not at all odd, for he is of a secretive nature. Such men," she slowly added, "make the best friends and—and—But I am talking nonsense!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SHERIFF GOES ON THE WAR-PATH.

ABNER ROBERTS was one of the shining lights of Mount Tabor. In small places everywhere a halo of glory hangs about the favored few who hold public offices, and this arm of the law in his official capacity was really second only to Mayor James. He fully realized his importance and made the most of it, and in many cases he was certainly zealous enough in the discharge of his duty.

There were those who complained because he was so intimate with Ben Braxton and "Jonathan," but he explained all this to Mayor James by saying he found the men useful.

Nothing was known of his life previous to his coming to Mount Tabor; but, judging from his looks, he must have met rough seas at times to make him look so old at thirty.

One day Mr. Roberts was seen posting a notice in a conspicuous place in the village, and when read it proved to be a reward offered for the capture of Don Sombrero. News had just come that two miners had the previous night been robbed by the road-agent, and the placard went up after a consultation between the mayor and the sheriff.

Afterward the latter rode out of the town to see the latest victims, but they could tell no more than that they had been humiliated and plundered by the cool outlaw, and as the sheriff rode homeward in the darkness he saw no clear way to success.

Deep in thought was the sheriff, but he was abruptly and rudely aroused when, passing along the very place where Dick Meeker had lost his dust, his horse suddenly stumbled and fell, pitching his rider like a rocket over his head.

The horse was soon on his feet, uninjured, but it was five minutes later when Roberts regained his senses, for the fall had been a hard one.

He came back to life to find himself again seated on his horse, but when he would have lifted his hand to his aching head, he was surprised to find his arms tied behind his back.

A touch on his shoulder caused him to turn his head, and there beside him, mounted on the famous black horse, was Don Sombrero!

It was the sheriff's first sight at the road-agent, but there could be no doubt. The serape, the big hat, the masked face—all went to prove it—and the arm of the law quailed for a moment at the fierce light which blazed from the stranger's eyes through the holes in his mask.

"Roberts," said the outlaw, in a deep, hoarse voice, "you are my prisoner."

The sheriff was quick-witted and an old companion of danger, and he rallied quickly.

"Devils alive!" he snarled; "and who are you?"

"Don Sombrero, at your service," was the calm reply.

"The outlaw."

"I am Don Sombrero," was the rejoinder.

"How dare you put bonds upon me?" cried Roberts, fiercely, after a vain wrench of his hands.

"I wasn't aware that it required much courage."

"Do you know who I am?"

"One Roberts, sheriff, etc."

"Oh! you can sneer now, but I'll make you pay dearly for this outrage."

"Is that what you call it? Ain't you a leetle hard on me? I only stretched a lasso across the road to trip your horse, and then, when I found you insensible, tied you up for fear you might injure the animal before I had time to explain that it was my fault."

The sheriff uttered a bitter curse. Not only were his hands bound, but his feet were tied under his horse's belly, and this elaborate piece of work rendered him wholly at the mercy of the road-agent. If he cried for help the sound would probably be wasted on the air, and, in any case, it was likely to bring Don Sombrero's revolvers to his head.

"Roberts," continued the road-agent, "I

may as well come to business. I see you have posted a reward for my capture, dead or alive."

"Yes, I have," was the savage reply.

"That is folly."

"I'll show you whether it is before I am through with you," snarled the sheriff.

"What do you propose to do?"

"Capture you."

"Now?"

"You dare not give me a chance, curse you."

"I should be a fool to do so, but, my good man, if we ever meet again, you are at liberty to try."

"Rest assured that I shall."

"If the darkness does not deceive me, you have a very dangerous look. However, sir sheriff, I advise you to let me alone. It was to give you this advice, and to let you know how little I care for you. placard, that I stopped you to-night. Let me say, right here, that you are not sharp enough to capture Don Sombrero, and you may get into trouble by trying."

"It is war to the death, anyway," Roberts declared.

"Just as you say, but remember one thing; I know you and you don't know me."

"My day will come."

Don Sombrero laughed in his peculiar hoarse way.

"Quite dramatic, Roberts. Have you anything more to say?"

"No."

"In that case, we may as well say good-night. Don't shed any tears over the parting, for you say we are to meet again. Your horse will find his way to the village unguided, after which you will be all right. *Vamos!*"

He struck the sheriff's horse a sharp blow on the flanks, and as he started off at a gallop, the road-agent's taunting voice was borne to his master's ears.

Once, the baffled sheriff looked back and saw his enemy sitting calmly on his black horse, but the sight was not a pleasant one and he did not care to look long.

The long strides of his own horse were rapidly taking him toward the village, and he began to consider what he should do when he arrived. His ultimatum was that he must go to the Casino, as no other place was likely to be open at that hour, and when he reached the town he managed to guide his animal to the door.

It was a very humiliating position when his loud shouts had brought out the convivial crowd, but he swallowed his rage as much as possible and was soon released.

He told his story with an unnecessary sprinkling of oaths, after which he called on volunteers to hunt for the road-agent. The crowd was willing but horses were lacking, and when a dozen men finally rode out on the war-path the venture seemed fated to end in smoke.

It did end thus. Don Sombrero was not seen, and when they turned back, Roberts went in a pet-grizzly mood which made his followers tremble. He had been beaten and humiliated, and nothing but the blood of the outlaw could heal his own wounds.

Before he slept, he had made a dramatic vow to capture Don Sombrero or die in the attempt.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAVE.

THE sheriff fully intended to keep his vow, but, the following morning, something occurred which changed his plans.

Half-way up the mountain, report said there was a valley where ruins of an old city were to be found, and since the report had been brought by some miners who stumbled upon it by chance, men had often spoken of "Aztec Valley," but no attempt had been made to explore it until Judge Austin, in his passion for such matters, formed the idea of taking a party of ladies and gentlemen to the place as a pleasure trip.

When Roberts learned that the Misses Austin were to be among the number, he entered heartily into the scheme which soon became a settled thing.

When the start was made, many of our characters were among the pilgrims—the entire Austin family, Rivers, Winship and Roberts, while Dick Meeker had been added as a "guide," though he knew nothing about the valley.

After a laborious climb they reached their Mecca, but it proved to be only a cliff-encircled valley, beautiful because filled with trees and wild flowers, but lacking all signs of ruined buildings or previous habitation.

They collected in a group after a vain search, disappointed and not a little tired, but Dick Meeker came to the front as a benefactor by suggesting that there were probably caves in the higher places worth exploring.

His words were like a match to firewood, and, in a moment, the younger people of the party were making a dash for the rocks.

"Let 'em go," chuckled Dick Meeker. "Ef this child knows anything o' the nature o' this region, we'll find 'em huddled together ag'in the cliffs like sheep, when we jine them. They will find it hard climbin' beyond."

"Perhaps Rivers will find a way up. He

has shown more than ordinary skill ever since we started."

"I more nor half believe he has been hyer afore. Mebbe it war a treasure-trip with him."

Nevertheless, Dick's first prediction was verified when they reached the limit of the valley; the young people were found looking in vain for a way to ascend the cliffs.

Meeker soon settled this matter. Austin, Winship and a few of the ladies had no desire to plunge into dark caves, provided any were found, so they remained to guard the horses, and the guide was not long in finding a way of ascent.

Once at the top, they paused for a short time to admire the view, with the snow-capped mountains to the east, and the lowlands to the west, after which, a systematic search was begun for a cave.

As Meeker had prophesied, they were not long in finding what promised to be one, and they stood in eager expectancy before a great, black hole in a towering ledge.

The guide went a little distance and secured a quantity of pine knots, suitable for torches, and with these lighted and in the hands of the men, they entered.

At first there was only a tolerably regular passage, but the way grew wilder and they found boulders and ledges in their path, in profusion.

"The place is large enough to hold an army," said Roberts.

"Isn't there an army here, already?" Viola asked. "We are a formidable party, at any rate."

"I should think pilgrims of darkness would be a more suitable name for us," said Rivers.

"Or seekers after the truth," suggested a wasp-waisted clerk.

"Where does your joke come in?" some one asked.

"The joke is, that he should be seeking for the truth," said Roberts, good-naturedly.

With such attempts at pleasantry, they pressed on until the way widened into what seemed a vast cave. They could not at first see its dimensions, but though there was no evidence of human handiwork, all were struck by the manner in which Nature had erected columns to support the vast roof, their form being irregular but firm.

They separated into small parties and scattered about the place, and as chance would have it, one of these parties was composed of Laura, Octavia, Viola, Rivers and Roberts.

For nearly a hundred yards they went without finding a wall to stop them, the light from the torch flickering on rocky columns and ragged roof, and then a spot was reached where their track ascended abruptly in a sort of ledge.

"Shall we go on?" Rivers asked.

"Why not?" returned Roberts.

"There is laborious climbing ahead, I think."

"That is just what we came for," said Laura.

"Certainly," cried the sheriff. "We must not be dismayed at sight of a steep grade."

And so they went on in a place which was like a stairway and not more than ten feet wide, and the ladies began to express their wonder.

"Can all these things be the work of nature?" Octavia asked.

"If men had any part in the work they must have been admirers of the piccadilly style," said Roberts. "Yes, nature has done this, surely, or we would not see so many ragged points."

"It is the giants' causeway," said Viola.

"And now we seem to be approaching their punch-bowl," said the Cavalier.

It was the sound of running water which had brought forth his remark, and, at the end of a few yards, they reached where the left-hand wall suddenly gave place to a chasm, at the bottom of which roared the unseen stream, and they had only a ledge along which to proceed.

Rivers's prudence would have made them pause there, but the sheriff, glad to see his rival weaken at last, scouted the idea of danger, and they were soon moving along the narrow way.

Octavia, usually very calm and methodical, seemed imbued with a new and reckless spirit.

"Mr. Rivers," she cried, "I want to look over into the chasm. Please hold your torch down for my benefit."

The Cavalier hesitated for a moment. He had not liked the idea of being on the ledge at all, and it seemed like tempting fate to go near the brink, but he caught Roberts's gaze fixed upon him with the old expression and set his teeth.

"He wants to make me appear a coward in their eyes," he thought, "but he shall not succeed."

So, while the others went a little past, he took Octavia's hand and went to the very verge.

Then he held his torch down, but they only heard the rushing water and saw black, damp rocks.

"I wish we could descend," said Miss Austin.

The words were scarcely spoken when there was a sharp crack, the rock seemed sinking under their feet, and the others, hearing a cry from Octavia, looked around just in time to see

both go down into the darkness, followed by a part of the ledge.

It had broken short off and precipitated them into the chasm.

Then the rosy cheeks of Laura and Viola grew pale, and the trio gazed in horror at the fatal spot.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Roberts, "I fear their rashness has cost them their lives!"

"Let us go for aid at once," faltered Laura.

"Wait," said the sheriff. "It may be they are not injured."

Testing the rock under his feet, he advanced to the brink, but nothing was to be seen and no sound came up from the depths except the roaring of the water.

"Call to them," said Laura, leaning against the rock for support.

He shouted their names, but there was no reply.

"Merciful God! they are killed by the fall!" Viola faintly said.

"Do not despair yet. Hope to the last," the sheriff advised; and then he shouted the names again and again.

In vain! Only the water answered his call.

Little did the girls suspect that he was thrilling with joy at the calamity, but such was the fact. For Octavia he cared nothing; and if Rivers was out of his way the greatest visible obstacle of his life was removed. Dashed to pieces in the chasm, the Cavalier could no longer rival him in the suit for Laura's hand.

Giving up the attempt at last, the trio hastened back to spread the alarm.

The news fell like a thunderbolt on the gay party, and, as Roberts secretly managed to whisper blame upon what he termed "Rivers's madness in being so reckless," there was more than one harsh comment made aloud as they hastened back to the fatal spot.

CHAPTER XII.

OCTAVIA'S ADVENTURE.

HAD the accident proved a fatal one for the two who went over the ledge?

Octavia was filled with horror when she felt the rock give way beneath her feet; she tried to turn and gain the solid footing, but the attempt was a failure, and she went down into the darkness.

Then came a severe shock and her senses deserted her.

How long she remained unconscious she did not know, but it was not the oblivion of death, and after a while consciousness returned.

Her mind at once leaped back to the accident, but there was nothing to indicate that she was any longer in peril. On the contrary, though evidently still in the cave, she was lying upon some sort of a couch, a pine torch was blazing not far away, and it seemed rather as though she had been rescued by her friends.

Still no one was visible, and she sat erect with a thrill of uneasiness.

She had hardly done this before a man came forward from the darkness and reassuringly said:

"Have no further fear, Miss Austin; you are safe, and you shall soon be with your friends."

At the first words he had been but dimly visible, but as he finished he came fully into the light, and Octavia was dumb from amazement.

She did not see one of her own party, as she had expected; but—what did she see?

A man of most remarkable appearance, taken all in all, and well calculated to alarm the fair sister of Judge Austin.

Perhaps it was her fancy, but he seemed to be of gigantic height and proportions, but more than that it was hard to tell, for, over his shoulders, was a *serape*, and, above it, a great hat which almost entirely concealed his face.

If she had been standing she might not have seen any more, but from her present position, she saw that a black mask covered his features.

She sprung to her feet with a face which grew even paler than before.

"Be calm, lady, be calm," the stranger quickly said. "I repeat, your danger is over."

"You—you—" began Miss Austin.

"I am your friend," he gently said.

"You have called my name, but I do not know you. If you are my friend, why is this masquerade?"

"I will soon explain. Before doing so, let me acknowledge that I am not one of your exploring party, but, I solemnly swear that you shall soon be with them, as safe and unharmed as when you left Mount Tabor. Now, dare you hear my name?"

Octavia's mind was in a whirl. Nothing could be more kind, gentle and chivalrous than his manner, but why was he thus disguised? Despite her twenty-eight years of life, there was a strong current of romance in her nature, and, if she could but persuade herself that there was no danger, the situation would be rather interesting of the two.

The courteous man of the mask knew her—she would hear what he had to say.

"I think an introduction would be proper," she said, with mild dignity.

"Then—do not start, Miss Austin!—I am Don Sombrero!"

The caution availed nothing; she did start, and a cry fell from her lips.

"Don Sombrero!" she gasped.

"Yes, Miss Austin."

"The road-agent?"

"So they call me, miss, but I beg that you will not think of me as such. Look upon me as your friend, for such I am in good faith."

"I cannot believe you," she said. "You are testing my courage."

"Ah! would to heaven it were so, lady. I wish that I was a better man, that my reputation was as spotless as yours, but it is not so. Although your sincere friend and humble servant, I am still Don Sombrero."

"You do not seem like an outlaw," she said, touched by his chivalrous gentleness.

"Still, Sheriff Roberts has offered a reward for my capture, dead or alive."

"There must be some mistake. You surely are not the bad man they think you."

"I trust I am not so black as they paint me."

"Yet, you acknowledge that you are Don Sombrero, and he is a—a—"

"Highway robber. I regret to say that that part is true."

"If you regret it, why do you lead such a life?"

Somehow, Miss Austin no longer felt a fear of the road-agent; she began to feel an interest in him and, woman-like, a desire to show him the wickedness of his ways.

"Fate drives me to it, lady, a fate which I deplore but can not defy. If you will listen, I will give you some idea of my situation, but, before I do this, let me explain how you came here and how I intend to speedily return you to your friends."

"I am listening," she graciously said.

"Well, then, to be brief, I was in the cave when you entered, and your advance drove me along the very ledge from which you fell. I was in the front when the ledge gave way, and after the accident occurred I descended by a path down the chasm, found you insensible and brought you here to recover."

"You must have been here before," she said, glancing at the couch, which was of fine branches covered over with a bearskin.

"I have slept here more than once. An outlaw's home is usually among the rocks, you know."

"It must be a dreadful life."

"It is not pleasant, but I hope for better things. But, to resume, you have now recovered, and, in a short time, I will see you safely with your friends."

"But what of Mr. Rivers?"

"I think he must have fallen into the stream and been carried down, but he will escape without injury. Do not fear for him. Now, if you will be seated, I would like to explain, or, rather, give you some idea why I am acting the part of a road-agent."

Octavia felt that she ought to return to her friends at once, but, surely, it would do no harm to listen to this courteous outlaw, and she might be the means of rescuing him from his wicked life.

So she sat down upon a boulder, and Don Sombrero took a similar position at a respectful distance.

"Miss Austin," he abruptly said, "the part of a road-agent is an unmanly one, as I will freely admit, but, can you not think of a case where such a thing might be a necessity? If a man had a great work which he wished to perform, would he not be justified in using the means at his command?"

"Nothing could justify him in using lawless means. A road-agent is a robber, and robbery is a crime."

She spoke rebukingly, plainly, but there was no harshness in her voice.

"True, but, suppose he intended to return every penny of the money thus secured when such a thing became possible? Would not that change the case materially?"

"Perhaps it might, in one sense, but his forced loans, as they might be called, would still be robbery, and he would be as guilty as ever in the eyes of the law. Other men would not accept his plea. Moreover, I do not think his resolutions of restitution would be kept."

"But what if he had solemnly vowed to keep them?"

"Now, you place me in a hard position. You do not convince me, and, if I repeat my former assertion, I seem to doubt your word."

"True, and I think I am asking too much in causing you to argue the question. We will let that drop. Now, if we remain here much longer, your friends are liable to appear, so we will cut the interview short; but, before going, I wish to tell you just what Don Sombrero is—all but his real name."

"Ah! you intend to withhold the most important part of all."

"I am obliged to do so, but, some day, you shall know me as I am. Until then, I beg that you will not think of me harshly. I have a great work to perform, as I said before, and I lack money. To obtain that, I act the road-agent, but I keep an account of every dollar thus obtained, and, some day, I swear that I will make full restitution."

CHAPTER XIII.

"WE SHALL MEET AGAIN!"

DON SOMBRERO's voice was earnest and pathetic, and Octavia felt a pang that such a man should be an outlaw.

"If your great work is a noble one," she said, "surely some one will freely loan you money to accomplish it."

"The venture has been unsuccessfully made."

"Perhaps—perhaps my brother would help you."

Don Sombrero started violently.

"No, no!" he exclaimed, "I would not go to him."

"And why not?"

"I must not go to any one near Mount Tabor," he answered, but she felt that it was an evasion.

"Better that than to commit crime and run the risk you do. You know the placard in the village reads, for your arrest, 'dead or alive,' and many men would shoot you in the back to gain the reward."

Don Sombrero laughed lightly.

"I defy them. The bullet is not molded as yet for me. No, I have no fear. My only anxiety is that you shall not think of me as a terrible outlaw."

"You can easily prevent it."

"How?"

"By reforming."

He looked at her steadily from under the great hat and she could see that his eyes were large and handsome. More, it struck her then that they were familiar. Had she some time seen him without a disguise, or were they like those of another man she had somewhere met?

"If I should reform," he slowly said, "how would you then regard me? Would it be as men look upon a convict who has served his time, coldly and sneeringly, or would you be willing to call me your friend?"

The color deepened on Octavia's cheeks. His pointed question and his earnest manner were enough to confuse her, but, beyond the flush, she remained calm.

"I feel sure that I am justified in saying you would be worthy of any woman's friendship," she answered.

He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Forgive me!" he humbly said, as he released it. "I ought not to have ventured so far, but your goodness overpowers me. If you knew, Miss Austin, how much I care for your friendship, your esteem, you would not wonder. Excuse me, but I dare make no promises, though you can rest assured of one thing—Don Sombrero will never be a desperate outlaw while you think so kindly of him."

"Sir, do not let your reform be partial; resolve here and now to forever abandon the calling of a road-agent."

"I am a victim of fate!" he groaned.

"You are a man, with a soul to save and an honorable future to grasp, if you will."

"More than that, I am a man who would risk his life for you, Miss Austin, unworthy as I am."

With these words he abruptly arose.

"It is not safe for us to remain here any longer," he added. "Come, let us go to your friends. I will conduct you near them and then vanish."

"Will you not promise first?"

They were standing face to face, soul looking at soul through their eyes.

He took both her hands in his.

"Inside of two weeks I will see you again and give my answer. I must have time to think, for I am being pulled two ways at once by forces of mighty power. On one side is my life work, on the other, your face, your eyes, your—regard."

"Let the latter win," she said, in a thrilling tone.

"No more, no more, or you will drive me mad," he hoarsely answered. "Do not fear to trust me; I—I think all will be well. Come, let us go."

Indescribable emotion swayed the judge's fair sister. To save such a man as this road-agent seemed to be would be a great work—to enjoy his friendship would be—

But was he not a road-agent, she the daughter of a proud old house?

Ay, it was so; but, weak, unwomanly, mad as it might be, no man had ever before moved her like this masked stranger. He must be saved.

"When and where am I to see you?" she earnestly asked.

"I cannot tell now, but it shall occur inside of a fortnight. I will find a time and place. During that fortnight, Miss Austin, you may often see me when you do not suspect the fact. Ay, I may even be in your presence and give you no sign. I may even talk with other ladies and seem to admire them, when I would much rather go to you. If such should be the fact, it will all be for a purpose."

"You leave me in deep mystery."

"It must needs be so for a time, but the cloud will some day lift. Until then, believe me, I will be thinking of you, and your face will keep me from crime."

His passionate words went to her heart and met a responsive voice, but was ever anything

so strange as this affair? She thought not, and so would those have thought who had often called her proud and cold.

"I will believe you," she simply said.

"A thousand thanks, Miss Austin. Now, I regret to say, that we must part, but I must go back or fall into the hands of the explorers. From here your path is safe and short, and with the torch to guide you, you will soon reach your friends."

He gave her the torch and their eyes met again.

"Good-by, Miss Austin," he said.

She gave him her hand.

"Good-by, for now, and all my good wishes go with you," she answered.

"Heaven bless you!" he said, huskily.

"Remember!"

"I will, until death."

Again he pressed her hand to his lips, then wheeled, his tread was heard for a minute and then—Don Sombrero was gone!

Octavia dared not pause for reflection. She hurried on through the passage, and after fifty yards, suddenly emerged into the main chamber of the cave.

As she did so she came face to face with Judge Austin, who had been summoned from the valley, and the glad look which mounted to his face, showed how troubled he had been.

Word was at once sent to recall the searchers, who had failed to find anything in the abyss, when they made the descent, and all were soon assembled in the cave, except Theodore Rivers.

Octavia had told her story to her brother, omitting much that was said, for she was resolved that no one should know her secret, and she was about to repeat it, when the missing man entered from the way of the valley.

He was drenched to the skin and had a few slight bruises, but was otherwise uninjured, and after Octavia had related her experience, he told how, when he fell, he had fallen into a stream, too swift to be successfully fought, and been carried to the outer world.

There was much talking and wondering—the day had furnished two startling adventures, and Octavia's, at least, had been most remarkable.

Rivers had listened attentively to her story, and though she merely said that Don Sombrero, without showing any rudeness, had conducted her to safety when she recovered her senses, he believed he could understand why the road-agent had been so kind.

"He would have been a brute indeed had he not been touched by her beauty. A face like hers ought to soften and redeem a worse man than Don Sombrero. If it were not for—"

His musings were interrupted when some one addressed him, and he told his own story modestly.

Among the whole party there was only one who felt no gladness at the way the adventure had ended. Sheriff Roberts had been strong in the faith that the Cavalier had gone to a violent death, and, now that he had returned in safety, he could hardly keep a scowl from his face.

The hour was growing late and the whole party soon deserted the cave, returned to their horses and began the return to Mount Tabor.

It was after dark when the village was reached, and, thoroughly tired, they at once broke up and sought their respective homes.

Octavia was subjected to considerable good-humored jesting from her nieces, but she bore all composedly, and when they suggested that Don Sombrero might yet enter the Austin family, she said that some one must soon come to the rescue, or there would be no maiden lady in the family.

They laughed at her reply, but it would have surprised them had they known how long Octavia remained by the open window that night and gazed steadfastly at darkness.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRIAD AT WORK.

The evening before the expedition to the mountain, as Pablo Diaz was sipping his wine in the Casino, a man sat down at the further side of the table and nodded familiarly.

He was a red-haired and whiskered man of middle age, dressed as a miner, and Diaz, not recognizing him, answered his salutation coldly.

"Got quite a mouth for wine, ain't you, stranger?" the miner queried.

"My mouth is my own," said Pablo, surly.

"Any more left where it was manufactured?"

"What is that to you?"

"Nothing, only I'm in pursuit of information."

"Then I will inform you that unless you mind your own business I will throw you out of the window," growled the Mexican.

"What's the matter with the door?"

Pablo started up with a curse, but the miner began to laugh.

"Don't you know me, Pablo?" he asked.

"Caramba! it ain't—it can't be the captain!"

"Yes, it can; I am the leader of the Triad. Excuse my impertinence, Senor Diaz, but I wanted to try my disguise. Now that it has deceived you, I think it will be too much for the sheriff."

"It surely will, senor," said the amazed Mexican.

Wilder leaned nonchalantly back in his chair.

"Did any one give me away to Roberts?" he asked.

"Yes, some of Braxton's friends betrayed you, but your levant thwarted him and he has made no arrest whatever."

"What of Braxton?"

"His hurts are healing slowly, but he swears he will be avenged on you."

"I don't care a continental for him."

"If he shows his teeth, remember the Triad is at your back. The negro and I are ready to fight for you."

"Thanks. What of Joe Pike?"

"Digging gold and muttering about Pike's Peak the same as ever."

"I owe him a favor. Now, then, to business. The Triad must strike to-morrow night."

"We are all ready."

"You see, the Austin family is going on a hide-and-seek, romantic trip up the foothills to-morrow, and they will come back so tired out that they will sleep like logs. Consequently, that is the time for us."

"Correct, senor."

"You don't suppose any one suspects our purpose, do you?"

"Not a soul."

"Well, I have new quarters this time and shall call myself Abe Turner while I wear this disguise. I don't want Roberts to tumble."

"He can't suspect anything. Even your own brother would not."

"I reckon if I was to show up with the circus men I should puzzle them all. At one time we were short of help and I used to chip in and wash the indelible marks off the tattooed man—our bills said the marks were put on him in New Zealand, but he had never been outside of the United States—and he professed to love me like a brother—when drunk. But I reckon this outfit would floor him."

"It is excellent."

"Well, I must go now, but I'll see you again. Meanwhile, prepare for to-morrow night."

"Ay, senor, we will."

Pablo spoke with alacrity, but Wilder, looking after him, as he went away, shook his head slowly.

"I doubt if he would be so ready if he knew of the white figure I saw the other night near the mound. Query, what was that figure—ghost or human? I don't know, but one sight of it would scare Diaz out of the job."

The night of the following day three men cautiously approached Judge Austin's house. It was nearly midnight, and as the Triad neared the inclosure they saw that all was dark and silent.

"Our arrangements will get us over the fence easily," said Wilder, "and we have only to fear Duke Dorval and the dog."

"The dog should be killed," said Diaz.

"We have talked of that before. We won't trouble the dog unless he troubles us. Are your ladders ready, Major?"

Jones answered affirmatively. By that time they were beside the iron fence, but they were prepared to overcome the barrier.

Wilder had manufactured two rope ladders, with hooks at the end, and whirling one of these over his head, he easily caught it on the top of the fence.

"So far, good. Remember, no noise about the work," he said, as he prepared to ascend.

Going up, he fastened the second ladder for the further side and then, by careful moving, managed to get himself over the barbs unscathed.

He dropped inside and Pablo lightly followed, but the negro, on arriving at the top, lost courage and was some time in getting his heavy body over the pinnacle. He succeeded at last and soon stood beside his allies.

The Triad had won the first move in the game.

"Golly! dat are was pokerish business," Jones declared.

"Silence!" commanded Wilder. "You are to make no unnecessary talk."

"I'm dumb, sah; lead on."

"Beware of the dog," said the ex-circus man, who never forgot the facetious side of the case.

Then he led the way across the yard and they were soon beside the mound.

The night was dark, and the bare plot of ground, fenced in by the small iron concern, had rather a spectral look, but the leader of the Triad was not given to idle fears.

"This fence is a mere eggshell," he said. "Take hold of one end and we will move it bodily."

He had some doubt about their ability to carry out the idea, but a strong effort in conjunction set it on one end, clear of the mound.

Their hopes began to run high. The house was quiet, the place of work retired, and the hour late; surely they ought to accomplish something.

And before them lay the mysterious mound, the sanctuary doubtless for proud chiefs and leaders of a people whose very name has been

lost to history, never to be made known. Under these bleak sods some of the mighty dead lay buried. Perhaps time had changed their forms to dust, or maybe they were petrified; but at any rate it was a place of deep interest.

It was not because of the things before mentioned that the Triad was so much in earnest. What to them were the mounds and legends of bygone days, so far as history and science were concerned? They sought only golden treasures.

"Dip in," said Wilder, tersely, as they took their spades.

Major Jones turned the first sod.

The earth was like baked clay, and even the leader of the robbers grew thoughtful as he saw the labor necessary to accomplish the work.

"I have heard it said that those old fellows built well," he muttered, "and it must be so, since even their graves are *adobes* in the rough."

"Golly!" said Jones, "we shall need suffin' ter sharpen de spades afore we are fru."

"We'll take your skull. Dig on, my worthy corner of the Triad."

"Look out that the buried men do not arise and seize you, Senor Jones," said Pablo, facetiously.

"Dey would neber take a fat darkey like I is. You mustn't t'ink dey are at all slow ef dey hab been buried dese four or five fousand y'arg."

"That's the way you size 'em, is it? Well, senor, we will argue the question anon."

The upper crust gave way slowly and there was a promise of easier digging beneath, so they worked with increased zeal.

Wilder, who was playing the part of a looker-on in Venice, often allowed his gaze to wander toward the house.

"She is sleeping the sleep of innocence," he muttered, "while I am playing the grave-robber. Such is the way of the world. The chances are she will never marry me, but her future husband may this day have been carrying a hod or picking his teeth in Frisco with a silver crowbar."

His career as an amateur philosopher suddenly ended as a baying sounded from the kennel of the dreaded dog.

"Golly! we am discovered!" cried Major Jones.

"Rubbish! The dorg has got the nightmare. Dig on, my dusky corner, dig on!"

But Pablo, who had looked keenly around at the first bay of the dog, suddenly grasped Wilder's arm and pointed with the other hand straight into the darkness.

CHAPTER XV.

"A GHOST CLOTHED ALL IN WHITE."

THE leader of the Triad glanced in the direction to which his attention had been directed, and, as one man, the three grave-robbers saw a white figure gliding through the garden. It was between them and the house, liable to pass on without seeing them but just as likely to do the reverse, and, in any case, an unsafe neighbor for their venture.

Wilder remembered the like object he had once before seen at the mound, but he had no superstition in his nature and had no thought that this prowler in white was anything more spiritual than some female inmate of the Austin house.

Not so with the minor "corners" of the Triad. Both were ignorant and superstitious, and when they saw the figure, Pablo fell to crossing himself and the negro's eyes dilated with horror.

"It am de ghost ob de dead men!" Jones said, with chattering teeth.

"He is angry because we have profaned the soil that covers his bones," Pablo added.

"Nonsense!" began Wilder, tersely; but, just then the white figure turned and glided directly toward the mound.

There was a simultaneous cry from Pablo and the Major, both wheeled together, and then there was "a vacancy in the air where they had stood" as they beat a precipitate retreat.

Wilder was equally alarmed, but from different reasons. If the unknown came to the mound she would not only find the burial-place disturbed, but, if they stayed, would also find them, a dire calamity in any case.

Catching up the several spades, he darted after his allies, but paused when at a safe distance to watch further developments.

Straight to the mound advanced the unknown, and, when there, she—we adopt Wilder's opinion in regard to sex—paused and looked as though surprised or angry at what they had done.

The overturned fence, the broken soil and the fresh earth told a plain story, and she remained for some time gazing at the vandalism in silence.

"It must be one of the Misses Austin," said Wilder, "though why she is prowling about at this hour I don't know. Confound it! I am tempted to retreat at once. If I am discovered, it will knock all my plans in the head and my vows to reform will be dashed to chaos in the start. However, I am not going to be bluffed. I have set out on a great and good work, money

I must and will have, and this is the place to get it. Aha! our ghost kneels by the mound."

Sure enough, the unknown had sunk on her knees beside the grave, and then Wilder saw her begin to restore the disturbed dirt to its place with her bare hands.

The sight was an unexpected one, for, whether she was one of the ladies of the house or a servant, it would have been more natural for her to let the man-of-all-work perform the task.

"Maybe it is one of the daughters, but, if so, she must be even crazier on the subject than old Austin. She acts just as though she was in deep grief."

So little work had been accomplished when they were interrupted, the mound soon began to assume its former appearance beneath the nimble fingers of the "specter."

"By Jupiter!" muttered Wilder, "I want to know who she is. I'll drop the spades here and creep through the bushes toward her. Wonder where my fellow 'corners' are?"

He glanced around in the darkness and finally discovered Pablo and the Major peering from behind a bush.

"Scared out of their wits," he commented, smiling grimly. "They don't cotton to ghosts."

He laid down his spades and began the advance on the creature by the mound.

To do this he was obliged to make a short *de-tour*, in order to avail himself of the cover of the bushes, but, steadily and silently, he neared the spot.

Then, putting his head out from behind a shrub, he saw—notting.

The specter had disappeared!

Even then he felt no superstitious fear, but, though he looked long and closely, there was no further sign of the unknown.

At the end of five minutes, he arose and went to the mound. The earth had been restored to its old place, as nearly as possible, and there was little sign of the work the Triad had done except in the overturned fence.

"Somewhat romantic and mysterious," he commented, "but I am not to be beaten off. I will summon my corners and begin anew."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when there was a sudden baying just behind him and he turned to see a man and dog rushing across the garden toward where Pablo and Major Jones had been hiding.

"Duke Dorval is on the track!" he cried, in consternation.

And then he saw his allies suddenly break cover and rush for the fence with the garden guardians in close pursuit, the voice of the dog making very audible music in the meanwhile.

"The jig is up! No more grave-digging tonight. Go it, you corners, go it!"

Forgetting his own danger, he followed after and saw his co-workers take to the rope-ladder and scale the fence with wonderful agility.

"I must save the spades; we shall want them again," he suddenly thought.

Running back to where he had deposited them, he snatched them up and started for the fence at a point somewhat above where his allies had escaped, and the spades were soon on the further side.

"So far, good, but how the dickens am I to get out? I suppose I can try it at the gate, but the concern is probably locked and Dorval will be spying around like a jealous Turk."

He looked critically at the fence, but, with all his circus accomplishments, it was too much for his vaulting powers.

"The situation is serious. I'm in, and there is no way to get out. What will she think if I am caught like a rat in her father's barn?"

He reflected and could see but one hope. There might be a chance at the front gate, and he must try it.

"The judge is a fool!" he said, as he crept through the bushes. "Who ever heard of a man in a civilized country building a fence like this?"

Cautiously he advanced, but, scarcely fifty feet had been passed when there was a shout from the left, quickly followed by an angry bay.

Duke Dorval and his dog were on the track.

Wilder had weapons in his belt, but, resolved to use them only as a last resort, he broke into a run and dashed through the garden with Dorval and the dog in hot pursuit.

His course was toward the further side of the inclosure, but he had no idea what he was to do when he reached it. There seemed no way except to turn at bay and face the guardians.

His eyes were busy, however, and, as he saw several stout young trees growing beside the fence he caught a sudden idea.

"I'll try it!" he muttered, desperately. "I may be spitted on the barbs like a Christmas turkey, but, if so, the mound will hold one more."

Dorval and his dog were not gaining any, but as he saw the intruder running into what he believed a trap, he had no doubt of ultimate success. He had confiscated the rope-ladders, and the way of escape was cut off.

Suddenly, however, he saw a sight which amazed him.

Wilder, running at full speed, leaped into the

air, and catching a stout branch which ran out nearly horizontally from a tree, made an effort superior to any ever seen in a circus and cast himself clean over the fence like a rubber ball.

Dorval paused in amazement. Such an act as that seemed more than human, and while the dog dismally bayed at the fence pickets, his fellow keeper looked for footprints to make sure his late visitor had been a creature of the flesh.

At that moment, Wilder, somewhat jarred by the force of his fall on the further side, was stealing silently away, but, look where he would, he could find no sign of his allies.

They had not paused until the village was reached, and, temporarily, at least, the Triad was defeated.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TELL-TALE PICTURE.

On the day following the mountain expedition, Theodore Rivers called at the Austin residence, nominally to inquire if Octavia had sustained any injuries from her adventure.

It was Judge Austin who first came to him in the sitting-room, and one glance showed that dignitary to be in ill humor.

"The ladies are in their rooms, but will shortly join us," he said, after a cordial greeting. "Octavia is feeling as well as ever, and I think it rather lucky of the two that the road-agent came to her aid."

"He may not be as black as he is painted," Rivers replied, smiling.

"Still, we don't want him around Mount Tabor, and Sheriff Roberts is determined to capture him. We are having too much outlawry about here. What do you suppose happened last night?"

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Yes, and no. When I put up the fence outside people laughed at me, but, thinking I had barred out all housebreakers, horse-thieves and marauders in general, I bore it philosophically. Now, however, I have found that my fence is not impregnable. The inclosure was last night entered by some unknown persons."

"Did they do any damage?"

"My man and dog put them to flight before their work was done, but not so soon but what we know their object."

"It was robbery, I suppose."

"Robbery of the mound, Mr. Rivers."

"Is it possible?"

"More than possible; it is true."

And then he told of the events of the previous night.

"It was bad enough to be roused from sleep, as we were, but it is worse to have the mound disturbed. Perhaps it would be of no value to you, sir, but I have a fancy for such things and I am going to protect it."

The speaker shut his teeth with a vicious snap and then continued:

"I now propose to put a solid stone wall, four or five feet thick, around it, and over the wall set an iron fence, which no human being can climb or break. I'll protect the mound, if I have to lay a train of dynamite all around the spot."

Plainly, the judge was not a man to be trifled with, when his foot was set down in earnest.

Rivers sympathized with him, as in duty bound, and shortly after, the three ladies entered to turn their thoughts to more pleasant matters.

Pleasant enough the time was to Rivers, for the next half-hour, and then he groaned in spirit, as a servant announced Sheriff Roberts.

Why, in the name of peace and good will on earth, did this man always appear like Bantos's ghost at the banquet?

For once, he had come on business, for he proceeded, first of all, to state to Austin that, as yet, no trace of the nocturnal intruders had been found, but, in all probability, they would soon be captured.

Such was the object of his call, according to his own statement, but he showed no haste to depart when his errand was done.

Rivers was at first tempted to take his own leave, but unwilling to desert the field, he concluded to remain and endure the torture Roberts's presence always brought to him.

Conversation ran on the would-be mound robbers, Don Sombrero, outlaws in general, and then drifted back to the former subject, and Austin invited all to go out and see the spot and listen to his plan for guarding it in the future.

"He is clean gone on the subject," the sheriff remarked, to Rivers, as they stood together, waiting for the others.

"Many people take a deep interest in such matters," answered Rivers, quietly.

"Did it ever occur to you that he may have some motive, which does not appear on the surface?"

"No."

"Yet, you or I would not make so much fuss about a pile of dirt."

"Every man has a hobby of some sort, and if his is of this nature, it is only such as many learned men engage in for years."

The approach of the judge prevented further

words on the subject, and all went out together.

The mound had been as nearly restored to its former condition as was possible, and there was little to be seen; but Duke Dorval, who chanced to be near, explained his encounter with the robbers, and Austin told how he intended to guard the place from despoilers in the future.

It was Rivers whom he forced to listen to his plans, and the others were standing a little back when Laura chanced to see a photograph lying on the ground.

She picked it up and saw the pictured face of a girl of bold and dashing beauty, a face she might have admired had she not recognized it as that of a girl of the village, whose reputation was none of the best.

"Di Vernon" was a sobriquet given her around Mount Tabor, and most other women shunned her because she often wore masculine dress and kept questionable company. Whether she was really worse or better than they thought her need not be here discussed, but the picture was at once recognized by Laura.

"How did this come in our garden? Perhaps it may give a clew to the robber," she said.

"I think Mr. Rivers must have dropped it when he took his handkerchief from his pocket a moment ago," said Roberts, carelessly. "Is it of any one you know?"

He stepped forward and looked for himself, and then hastily added:

"Excuse me, for I see I was mistaken. Of course it is not Mr. Rivers's property."

Laura turned the picture over and changed color. There, written in a feminine hand, were these words:

"Theodore, from his loving Di."

It seemed to be an embarrassing moment for Miss Austin, but, as Octavia and Viola came forward, in a flutter of excitement she brushed past them and extended the picture to the Cavalier.

"Pardon me, Mr. Rivers," she said, in a voice which was calm, but rather unnatural, "but you should not be so careless of your treasures."

He took the picture and looked at the pretty face in a manner more curious than guilty.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"I think you ought to know."

"I? And why so?"

"I judge by the inscription on the back."

He turned it over and read in surprise.

"No wonder you thought so," he said, laughing, "but I must deny the soft impeachment. I do not make a photograph album of my pockets, nor do I know the original of this picture. I am not the Theodore in question."

He looked up in what seemed smiling innocence, but each of the ladies was looking at him coldly.

"Then it is only a coincidence," said Laura, in the same strained voice.

"Probably that word covers the whole case. At any rate, I know nothing of this picture or of Di. Pray, from whence did it come?"

"I found it upon the ground."

"Then it was probably dropped by the robber," he said, quickly.

"Very likely. Pardon me for suspecting you Mr. Rivers, but I thought at first you dropped it yourself when you took your handkerchief from your pocket."

So far, Roberts had listened in silence; his face very calm, but his time for speaking had come.

"Mr. Rivers's theory is a good one," he said, "and I shall now watch this Di with a view to finding the would-be mound-robbler."

"Since you have business of which to talk," said Laura, coldly, "I will ask you to excuse me."

She said good-day to each one, and, followed by Octavia and Viola, retreated to the house.

Rivers, with his keen perceptions, could not but see that something was wrong. It was very evident in the manner of the ladies, and Austin looked unusually stern.

So the Cavalier looked again at the picture, believing that in that lay the cause of this sudden upheaval.

It was a pretty face, but he saw the boldness of look very plainly and began to scent trouble in the air.

CHAPTER XVII.

RIVERS SPEAKS PLAINLY.

MOVED by a sudden thought, the Cavalier turned to his companions.

"Gentlemen," he said, "is there any one in this vicinity who answers to the name of 'Di'?"

"There is sir," said the judge, stiffly.

"Who is she?"

"A young woman who goes by the name of Di Vernon, but she has the adventuresome spirit of Scott's heroine without any of her good qualities. In brief, a female who rides like a Centaur, shoots like a Creedmoor star and a prairie scout combined, drinks wine freely and often dresses in male costume."

"And this picture, purporting to be 'from Di to Theodore,' is that of this madcap?"

"Yes, sir," said the judge, coldly.

"It is no wonder the ladies retreated to the house, for I am placed in a very unenviable light. Judge, I wish to give you my word of

honor that I never saw this Di, and that I never saw the picture until it was handed me by Miss Austin."

"I am glad to hear it."

Still the cold tone, and Rivers saw that he was not believed. He fixed his gaze upon Roberts, and there was suspicion and resolution in the glance, but the sheriff did not waver.

"Can you give me a clew to this mystery, sir?" he asked.

"My theory is that it was dropped by last night's intruders," said Roberts, with apparent frankness.

"It was not here at any time during the morning," said Austin.

"Perhaps it lay further off and was dragged here by the ladies' dresses."

"Be that as it may, I propose to solve the mystery before another day," said Rivers. "Until I have succeeded in proving that it is not my property I feel that I shall not be well regarded by my friends."

The judge looked at him keenly. He seemed sincere, and his face was that of an honorable man.

"Do not be troubled, Mr. Rivers," Austin said, impulsively. "We are not people to condemn a man on suspicion, and I beg that you will not feel any embarrassment about calling at Arcadia."

It was a remarkable outburst for the stern judge, and the Cavalier thanked him warmly.

"We will drop the subject for now," he said, putting the picture in his pocket, "but I shall sift the matter to the bottom. This Di shall explain to whom she gave this picture."

No more was said on the subject, but Roberts was shrewd enough to read the glance bestowed upon him.

"He suspects me of putting up a job on him," he thought; "but he can do all the sifting he sees fit. He will not succeed in implicating me, and unless I am greatly mistaken he has to day lost more ground than a season's work will recover. We will see if the three graces will henceforth flutter around him like moths before a candle."

Both of the visitors departed without seeing the ladies again, and, curiously enough, both had business in the village immediately after. Rivers went to seek some one who knew the residence of the madcap girl, and the sheriff had just as important a matter to look after.

The following day Sheriff Roberts was riding out of the village, when he espied a horseman coming from the opposite direction.

As he came nearer he recognized Rivers, and the expression of his rival's face told him that a storm was brewing.

"How do you do?" the limb of the law blandly said. "Fine day, isn't it?"

"It suits me well enough. Are you in haste?"

"Well, rather. Don Sombrero was on a maraud last night and relieved a rich ranchman of his money, giving him quite a bad scalp-wound at the same time."

Rivers looked surprised.

"Is it possible?"

"Possible and true. I'm going over now to see the victim and get his statement."

"After which I suppose you intend to capture the road-agent?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"I wish you good luck," said the Cavalier, with a dryness which indicated a lack of faith in the sheriff's ability to do it. "While going, perhaps you will oblige me by watching for Miss Di."

"If I see her I'll let you know."

"Do you imagine you would have to work very hard to find her?"

"Oh! she'll reappear in a few days," was the careless reply.

"Not while it is to any one's interest to keep her out of the way."

"Do you suspect such is the case?"

"Yes, sir; I do. Shall I tell you whom I suspect?"

"Certainly."

"I suspect you, Sheriff Roberts."

"Me?"

"You, sir."

"Why the dickens do you suspect me?" the sheriff cried, in seeming amazement.

"Because I believe you hate me, desire my discomfiture and disgrace, and you knew of no better way to accomplish your object. That picture game was a plot to poison the minds of the Misses Austin and turn them against me."

If Roberts had ever been at a loss to gauge his rival's pluck, the last doubt was removed. His face was calm but implacable, his eyes were blazing with scorn, and though he talked coolly, there was a steel-like ring to his voice that was ominous.

Still, the sheriff was not a coward, and he would have flung the word liar at the other had not his cunning brain told him there was a better way.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "are you mad, Rivers? You must think very poorly of me to make such a charge. Why should I wish to poison any one's mind against you?"

"You do not want me at Arcadia."

"Aha! so the wind blows from that quarter. I see all now, but you wrong me, Rivers. I am not the dastard you think me."

"You choose a good term, sir. It was a dastardly piece of work. You laid your plot well. Less than a week ago the girl Di went to Bush, the photographer, and sat for her pictures. They were delivered to her the night before the picture was found at Arcadia, and Bush has a negative exactly like the one found. I claim, sir, that you wrote what was on the back and sent it into Miss Austin's hands because you thought she would not have among her friends a man who was intimate with the girl Di."

"Perhaps you can substantiate your claim," said Roberts, trying hard to keep down his anger.

"I intend to do so, sooner or later, but, as you hurried to the girl and sent her away from Mount Tabor, post-haste when you found me so hot on the trail, I shall have to wait awhile."

The keen eyes of the Cavalier saw that Roberts was playing nervously with the hilt of his knife, but, with a powerful effort, he swallowed much of his rage.

"Rivers," he said, "you are doing me a great injustice. I am as innocent as an unborn babe. I know nothing of the picture, I did not send Di away from Mount Tabor, and I have hatched no plot with her. Moreover, I am very sorry this trouble has occurred."

"You plead not guilty, then?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, be that as it may, you and I had best understand each other from this time. I have seen much and heard more which leads me to think you are my enemy. You tried to poison the minds of people at the cave when Miss Octavia had so narrow an escape. You talked about my recklessness, when you know you urged me on to that point by word and look."

Roberts held up his hands in seeming horror.

"What next?" he cried.

"Next," said Rivers, sharply, "we are enemies. I hate a snake in the grass, and, believing you to be just that kind of a man, I shall watch you. Take care, Sheriff Roberts, that you do not fall into your own pits. Good-day!"

The Cavalier dashed the spurs into his bay horse and galloped away, unheeding the shout which followed.

"Devils alive!" bissed the sheriff, "the cuss has sealed his own doom!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHEERFUL ABE'S DEAL.

As Rivers rode away he watched the sheriff until sure he was beyond pistol-shot, and then looked no more.

"It may be I was foolish to put him on his guard," he muttered, "but I had to let the despicable wretch know what I thought of him. Moreover, I propose to beat him at his own game and let Laura Austin know him as he is. If I intended to marry the girl myself I would not do more than I will do now."

As he neared the village he saw a man lounging in the road, and at once recognized him.

"It is Cheerful Abe," he said. "He is prompt, and I hope he has good news."

He galloped on until he reached the man, and then drew rein.

"Good-morning," he said.

"Mornin', squire, mornin'," said the other, genially. "It's a glorious day, ain't it?"

"Very fine."

"It makes my soul expand," Cheerful Abe declared. "Sech weather is the actom o' human bliss."

"Well, have you any news?"

"Some, squire, some. All looks bright along the horizontal. Did you meet the sheriff? I saw him gallopin' by like an Arabian simon a bit ago."

"I met him and told him just what I thought of him."

"You did?"

"Yes. It was rash, I suppose, but I couldn't help it. He is a first-class villain."

"A pestiferous cuss," amended Cheerful Abe.

This latter person, by the way, was one that Rivers had called into his service because he needed some one and had to strike hap-hazard. He was, to all appearances, a very plain miner, rejoicing in the sobriquet of Cheerful Abe, but, really, named Abe Turner, according to his own statement.

Only two people in Mount Tabor knew that he was in disguise—Pablo Diaz and Major Jones knew him to be the leader of the Triad.

As "Cheerful Abe," the ex-bareback rider had assumed a very frank and genial air, which favorably impressed Rivers when he had run upon him, and a bargain was soon made.

Wilder caught at the chance to work against Roberts, and the Cavalier believed he had found just the man he wanted.

"Well," continued the latter, "what have you discovered since I saw you?"

"I've diskivered the owner o' the footprints."

"Ha! who is he?"

"Ben Braxton."

"That ruslian?"

"Yes."

"Roberts seeks fine allies."

"Vultures of a feather flock together."

"Well, then," said Rivers, energetically, "I think the case stands about in this way: Roberts hatches up the plot alone, but is too shrewd to show his hand. He goes to Braxton and seeks his aid. The bully goes to the girl, Di, and offers her a good sum for her picture. She has none, but is induced to go to Bush and sit for the photographs. They are delivered to her at the proper time and she meets Braxton where I found their footprints and gives him one of the lot. This one he passes along to Roberts. So far, the case is clear, but what are we to do next?"

"Make Braxton confess."

"How can we do it?"

"I have a plan which I think will work."

"What is it?"

"He must be made drunk an' then pumped."

"Can you do it?"

"I reckon I kin. Ef you will leave the matter to me, I will undertake ter make him confess in ther presence o' two witnesses, an' the three on us ought to be enough ter convince ther folks at Arcadia."

"Can you get good witnesses?"

"Do you know Reynolds, the ranchman?"

"Yes."

"Wal, his two sons are jest home from an Eastern college. They fell afoul o' me last night an' want me ter show 'em ther ropes o' Mount Tabor. They are ter be my witnesses, an', as they stand wal with ther Austins, I reckon their testimony would be convincin'."

"It would, indeed," said Rivers, earnestly. "If you can make this scheme work, you shall be well paid."

The two remained in conversation for some time longer, after which the Cavalier rode homeward.

"Matters have taken a queer twist," said Wilder, looking after him. "One would think I had work enough on my hands to secure the mound treasure, but, if I can beat the sheriff and win an honest penny at the same time, I'm in for it, neck and heels. The Triad can wait. Ab! what would the circus boys say if they knew the new roles I am enacting? I am a treasure hunter and a detective combined. Wouldn't the tattooed man rejoice at my good fortune!"

That night, the Casino was in full blast and Ben Braxton was in high spirits. His hands had nearly healed where Pablo's knife cut through them, and, though still watching for Wilder, whom he failed to recognize in Cheerful Abe, he was as amiable as a well-fed grizzly.

While lounging about the room he felt a touch on his arm and turned to see the disguised leader of the Triad.

"Pard," said Cheerful Abe, "d'y'e want some fun?"

"Reckon I do," the bully declared.

"Thar are a pair o' fresbies over yon what want two veterans, es they call it, ter chum with them."

"Say no more," said Braxton. "Ther howlin' tempest o' the Rockies is on deck."

And then Cheerful Abe led the way to the table where two young men with brain-new miner's suits on their backs, and the unmistakable pallor of civilization on their faces, were awaiting him.

Of course, the young men were the ranchman's sons before mentioned, and, though they looked very mild and innocent, they were, like most college graduates, thoroughly at home in many dark ways.

Braxton was introduced, and he sat down and smiled like a hyena. The young men wanted to play cards a little, and he was only too willing to accommodate them.

For half an hour, matters went uneventfully but favorably. They played for small stakes, and, as Cheerful Abe had whispered to the bully that it would be well to let them off light for then and fleece them at another time, little money changed hands.

Braxton had been drinking heavily all the evening, and, when Cheerful Abe volunteered to pay all liquor bills, the fellow kept it up, much to the delight of the allies.

He was preternaturally witty, he "guyed" the young men in what he thought an obscure way, frequently winking to Abe, and was, in his own opinion, brilliant beyond comparison.

But, in the midst of his splendor, he grew thick-headed, and the astute leader of the Triad saw that the time had arrived for his attempt.

He suggested that the young men ought to be introduced to some of the young ladies of the vicinity.

"Who shall we take?" he asked, of Braxton.

"I don't know of any one better than Di Vernon," the bully declared.

"She don't know me," said cheerful Abe.

"I couldn't give ther introduction."

"I kin," Braxton declared. "She knows me, an' I've got a grip on her. She will do what ever I say."

"Good looking?" asked one of the young men.

"A reg'lar Hebe. Oh! she's a daisy from Ozark an' no discount."

"I don't want any homely woman."

"She ain't that kind. Ef I had her pictur' I'd show you. I had one, t'other day, but I lost it."

"That was bad. How did it happen?" the young man carelessly asked.

"Wal, I'll tell yer," the fellow answered, with a sudden outburst of confidence. "It's the richest thing you ever heerd on. Yer see thar is a rich galoot lives nigh here named Rivers. I hate him 'cause he is rich, an' when I found him sparkin' a gal up nigh his house—her name is Austin—I thought I would put up a job on him jest fur fun. So I goes ter Di an' gets a pictur', an' on ther back I gits her ter write a verse o' poetry in this wise: 'Theodore, from his lovin' Di.'"

Braxton leaned back in his chair and laughed until tears ran from his eyes, while the allies looked at each other exultantly. They were on the trail of the serpent.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GLIMMER OF LIGHT.

WHEN Braxton's mirth had somewhat subsided, he went on with his story, encouraged by the admiring words of his companions and another drink of whisky.

"Havin' thus fixed ther pictur'," said the bully, "I put it whar it would do the most good."

"Sent it to Rivers, I suppose," said one of the young men.

"You s'pose wrong, young feller. What good would that do? No, I went ter old Austin's an' flirted it over ther fence, right whar the gal would find it. O' course she did find it, got mad at Rivers 'cause he had another gal, an', resultantly, Betsey and I are out. See?"

Again the fellow indulged in a spasm of mirth, but Cheerful Abe was not satisfied. Braxton had undoubtedly been speaking of what he knew, and, as no one except Roberts could have spoken of the scene at Arcadia outside of the house, it followed that the bully had really had a hand in the scheme. But, he had not yet mentioned an accomplice.

So the three went to work to gain further revelations, but not a thing could be learned. All their cunning arts and seductive words availed nothing—he had become close-mouthed and would tell no more.

Evidently, enjoying the trick against Rivers too much to keep it to himself, he had made the revelation in a drunken outbreak, but, even then, was too shrewd to betray Roberts.

They were not inclined to give up the battle, but, when his utterance grew so thick as to be indistinct, they propped him against the wall and he was soon asleep.

Enough had been learned to clear Rivers's name, but they had failed to implicate the sheriff.

Cheerful Abe bade his allies good-night, with the agreement that they were to meet at ten o'clock the following day, and the young men left the Casino.

Outside the door they saw a long-bearded miner who accosted them.

"Boycies," said he, "I hopes es how you'll excuse my meddin', but I'm an old 'Forty-niner, an' I'd like ter say a word ter you."

"Go on, duke, go on," said one of them, favorably impressed by the man's looks.

"I see'd you in thar hotnobbins' with Ben Braxton. You seem ter hev slewed him under ther table, but I want to warn yer that he is a bad egg. I've b'en in California sence '49, an' I never see'd a wuss reptyle than Ben Braxton."

"You think if we fool around him we'll get our wings singed, do you?"

"Yas, that's ther lay-out."

"Don't you worry about us. We have had our first and last interview with Mr. Braxton. Good-night."

They walked off leaving him staring at them blankly.

"They tar themselves away like a peon from a mesquite," he muttered. "Reckon they won't tell me why Ben Braxton was made drunk, but I'll try Cheerful Abe. Ef thar wa'n't some scheme goin' on ter-night my name ain't Joe Pike."

The following day the family at Arcadia was assembled in the sitting-room when four callers were ushered into their presence, and they saw Rivers, the Reynolds brothers and a miner who was introduced as Mr. Turner.

Since the finding of the picture, the Cavalier had not been near the house, and they wondered what meant this visit, but, after being received with much more cordiality than he had expected, he plunged at once into business.

Referring to the picture affair, and his vow to clear up the mystery, he briefly told the result.

"I went at once to the village, in search of the girl, but, when I learned where she lodged, she was gone, having disappeared an hour before—a fact which leads me to believe she was sent away by some enemy of mine."

"By questioning her landlady, I found that the girl had lately had a dozen photographs taken, and, on visiting Bush, the photographer,

I found the negative in his possession. Once more I saw the hand of an enemy, for I believed some one had sent her to the artist in order to secure a picture for a particular purpose.

Furthermore, the landlady's son told me he saw the girl give one of the pictures to a man outside the house, and at that place I found well-defined footprints of heavy boots.

Then I called Mr. Turner into my service, and, after some time, he discovered that the maker of the tracks was Ben Braxton, the village loafer. So far, all was well, and it only remained to get a confession from Braxton.

Mr. Turner suggested that he be made drunk and then questioned. The idea struck me favorably, and these gentlemen were called into the case.

He turned to the young men, and one of them laughed and said:

"Father would make Rome howl if he knew we had been inside the Casino, but we went in a good cause and old Braxton was pumped dry."

Rivers asked him to tell the result of the attempt on Braxton, and he gave the story graphically.

The Cavalier watched the Austins closely while Reynolds was talking, and he saw that they did not doubt his word. Each face lightened, and Laura, in particular, looked as though a heavy load had been lifted from her mind.

Then they congratulated him on having cleared up the mystery, adding some statements which were less sincere. They had never told him they believed him guilty, and now they would have been rather more than human if they had not assured him they always thought him innocent.

He took all these things for what they were worth, but, plainly seeing that he had cleared his reputation, was perfectly satisfied with their manner.

"Braxton took a good deal of trouble to play a trick upon you when he had so little object," said Austin.

"My dear sir, there is still a mystery in the case. There was some one behind the ruffian in the work, and this man I propose to find. It may not be done at once, but, sooner or later, he shall be unmasked. Braxton was but a tool, but, even in his drunkenness, he was too shrewd to betray his master."

"It looks to me," said Octavia, boldly, "as though one of the persons standing by the mound that day intentionally dropped the picture. I do not see how it could be thrown so far from outside the fence."

"And those present were Sheriff Roberts and ourselves," said Laura.

"You cast a suspicion on the sheriff by those words," said Austin, rather severely. "Of course, he would not be guilty of such a thing."

"People charge that he frees criminals when they give him money," retorted Laura, "and if that is so—"

"Assertion is one thing, proof another," the judge frigidly interrupted.

Rivers saw that it would not do to speak against his rival, so he skillfully changed the subject and a half-hour passed pleasantly.

Only one person was ill at ease. This one was Horace Wilder, alias "Cheerful Abe." It had been a reckless piece of business for him to come to the house at all, but he had run the risk, as he believed his disguise to be perfect, and he was not recognized either as the ex-bareback rider or the mound robber.

He took care to talk but little, and then in a careful way, but the ladies, anxious that he should not think himself slighted, addressed several remarks to him, and he was kept on nettle.

He was glad when Rivers said they would go, and still more pleased when once outside the door.

"Would you like to look at the mound, Abe?" asked the unsuspecting Cavalier. "They are working on it now to thwart another attempt from robbers."

"Never mind, squire. I hev no desire. Tombs an' graveyards ain't in my line."

Rivers smiled, and they were passing on when the "twin guards," as Cheerful Abe named them, made their appearance, and while Dorval spoke to the Cavalier, the dog ran to the Triad leader's side and began to introduce himself.

The victim of his kindness was in agony. What if the keen-scented animal should discover that he was the mound robber?

The false beard at his throat grew hot and heavy at the thought, but he passed through the danger unscathed.

They left the grounds, separating outside the gate, and as they went their way both indulged in a soliloquy.

Wilder wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a sigh.

"It was a terrible trial, but I have come out with colors flying. I think that act my masterpiece, but I am glad I am off the stage. The fat woman of the N. E. & C. circus always used to say I was 'bound to extinguish' myself sooner or later, and I think that my greatest

effort. But what would she say if she knew handsome Cheerful Abe was longing to clasp her in his arms? Ha! ha!"

He laughed merrily and went on toward the village.

Rivers, striding homeward, was in a less joyous mood. His face was clouded and there was a pained look in his eyes.

"I could not have been more in earnest if I had been wishing to marry into the family," he muttered; "but some one has said that revenge is sweeter than love. Is it? I came here to ruin this family, but her face makes me waver. Bah! I am no longer a boy. Let me remember only my oath of vengeance. I must and will carry out my plan. I have sworn it!"

CHAPTER XX.

DON SOMBRERO'S WARNING.

MOUNT TABOR was ablaze with excitement. On the evening after the events of the previous chapter, the stage which brought passengers and the mail to the village rolled into the place in a dismal and serious plight.

The driver drew up before the post-office, in which building was also a hotel, and when the landlord asked him if he had any "pilgrims," he lugubriously pointed to the interior.

"Thar is one thar ef he ain't dead. He has got a lead pill in his side, and mebbe, he ain't with us poor sinners now."

"How did it happen?"

"Don Sombrero," was the brief reply.

"Good Lord!" said the landlord, in horror.

"That ain't all. The mail-bag is gone."

"Thunderation!"

The driver opened the door of the stage and found the passenger still alive, but badly wounded. While he was being carried into the hotel, the driver was besieged by questioners, but he deigned no reply until he was safely inside the bar-room and "loaded" with a glass of whisky.

Then he told the adventure in a thrilling way.

The stage had been stopped by Don Sombrero, who demanded all the valuables aboard, including the mail-bag. He, the driver, felt inclined to make a fight, but when he pulled the trigger of his revolver no report followed, and Don Sombrero laughed mockingly. The weapon had been spiked, and the driver looking into the double-sixes of the road-agent, decided to be counted out.

Not so the solitary passenger. He had money and pluck, and he wanted both for future reference. He tried a Creedmoor shot at Sombrero and missed, and then the latter covered his target and dropped the lead in the man's side.

Having thus cleared the field, he confiscated whatever struck him as being ornamental or useful, bade them good-day and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Such was the driver's story, and, as before said, it set Mount Tabor in a blaze. Don Sombrero as a robber had been bad enough, but when he went to shooting pilgrims and trifling with Uncle Sam's mail, his offense grew too great for endurance.

The news reached the ears of Sheriff Roberts in due time, and not long after, his placard was replaced by another, doubling the reward offered for Don Sombrero's capture, and terming him an outlaw and assassin.

Moreover, the sheriff began to enlist recruits to go in search of the road-agent, and, with twenty men pledged to follow him, a general search was planned for the following day.

That night nobody talked of anything except Don Sombrero, and one woman, hearing of the affair, grew sad-faced at the memory of a promise so soon broken. Octavia's influence over the road-agent had been proved futile.

That afternoon, Sheriff Roberts had called at Arcadia, and learning of the confession of Braxton, he rightly interpreted the coldness he perceived in the manner of the three ladies, and knew that not only had his plot failed, but that they had doubts of his innocence in the matter.

He rode home in a savage mood, but he was not one to give up tamely and he swore to crush Theodore Rivers in one way or another.

Anticipating the result, he sent a messenger to his rival requesting his presence at the search of the following day, but Rivers sent back a curt answer.

"Tell Sheriff Roberts," he said, "that I am not a man-hunter. I leave that art to him."

It was a message which pleased the plotter, and he took pains to proclaim it publicly, insinuating that the Cavalier sympathized with the road-agent, and trying his best to stir up a feeling against him.

The next day came, and with it the man-hunt; but the searchers returned empty-handed—Don Sombrero was not found.

That evening, however, the village was again stirred up and conclusive proof was given that the road-agent still lived.

Some little time after dark, one of the villagers was on his way to the Casino, when he heard the sound of a horse's-hoofs behind him. He looked around and saw a man galloping toward him, but thought nothing strange of it until he reined in at his side and spoke sharply:

"Tom Gassett!"

The man looked around again and then a thrill of alarm ran through him. He saw a muscularly-built individual, in a serape and big hat, with a mask over his face, and though he had never seen Don Sombrero before, he had no trouble in recognizing this man to be he.

"Do you know me?" continued the rider.

"I—I believe I do."

"You were hunting for me to-day, and now I have come to you."

"I only went with the crowd," Gassett declared, alarmed lest the road-agent intended to seek revenge.

"Oh! you needn't be alarmed. I am not thirsting for your blood, but I want you to do me a favor. Trot along at my horse's head."

Gassett dared not refuse. He had revolvers in his belt, but he had no desire to try titles with Don Sombrero.

He promptly obeyed, and his companion led the way to the spot where Sheriff Roberts's placard was posted.

"Do you see that bill-board?" the robber asked.

"Yes, but I had no hand—"

"It offers a reward for the capture of Don Sombrero, dead or alive, and accuses him of sundry crimes. Now, I am going to put my card beside it, after which I want you to go to the Casino and bring out the crowd to read it. Will you do so?"

"Certainly," the man answered.

The road-agent produced a piece of pasteboard, a hammer and nails, and began to deftly post his notice beside Roberts's.

Gassett looked warily around. The outlaw was in their midst and ought not to escape, but, as luck would have it, no one except themselves were around just then, and he did not care to buck against him alone.

He began to hope he was to get clear without bodily harm, but the boldness of the robber in thus entering in the lion's den was most amazing.

"There, that is done," Don Sombrero commented. "Now, precede me to the Casino and call out the boys. I'll give them a good look at me and then skedaddle, but I want you to lead them to this spot. See?"

"Oh, yes."

"On to the Casino, then."

It was not far to the saloon, but Gassett felt as though he was treading on eggs and he was glad enough when it was reached.

"Now, go in and tell them that Don Sombrero is outside," said the road-agent, as he halted a few yards from the door.

Gassett walked moderately until near the door and then darted in like a boy fleeing from the darkness; but he was once more himself when inside, and he quickly made known the fact that Don Sombrero was in the village and on exhibition.

Instantly bottles and cards were dropped and the crowd flocked to the door.

There, just far enough away to be safe from their revolvers, he was calmly sitting on his black horse, and the villagers paused in amazement.

"Good night, gents!" Don Sombrero shouted, and then, like a flash, the gallant horse sprung away, and his master waved one hand as he receded.

A half dozen futile shots followed him, but no one evinced a disposition to pursue. Instead, when Gassett mentioned the lately-posted placard, they surged to that place and all were soon reading the notice.

READ AND REFLECT.

"Know all men by this pasteboard, that Don Sombrero is still at the helm. He comes of an epidemic that can't be caught without close contact. Don't think him as bad as he seems, and don't you get any false doctrines into your heads. The attack on the stage was not made by the original Don Sombrero, but by a base coward and ruffian who was a wolf in an eagle's clothing. This is to warn that man that he shall pay the penalty of his crime to the death, and to warn all Mount Taborites not to harbor or trust him in the name of the author of this card. Take one."

DON SOMBRERO."

CHAPTER XXI.

OCTAVIA AND THE ROAD AGENT.

THE crowd read this notice to the end in silence, and then all began to speak at once.

"Wal, ef that ain't the cheekiest thing out!" said one, in amazement.

"The varmint is a cool cuss, anyway," said Dick Meeker. "He took my dust away, onc upon a time, but I actually begin ter admire him. Thar ain't many men that would hav ther courage ter ride right inter ther town like he did."

"It seems somebody has be'n stealin' his thunder," said Cheerful Abe. "He repudiates the stage robbery."

"That is all rubbish, o' course," said Ben Braxton. "He don't want ter be hung fur murder, so he tries ter shift ther blame off his shoulders."

"I'm rather inclined ter ther opinion ther crittire told ther truth."

"Don't you believe it, Abraham. It's too old a dodge ter work in Mount Tabor."

"It don't matter much," said Pablo Dinz. "The man shot in the stage won't die, and Don Sombrero is a road-agent, just the same."

"Yes, sah, an' he am a clipper, too," said Major Jones.

"My worthy corners," said Cheerful Abe, lowering his voice, "it won't do for us to say much for the highwayman, but I do rather like him. He likes money, and so does the Triad, every corner of it. The only difference is, he gets it and we don't. His pluck reminds me of the tiger-tamer of the old N. E. & C. He was one of the bravest men I ever knew. People admired him so much that he used to go among the crowd after his performance just to let them shake hands with him. He never came back with less than ten pocket books and as many watches. He was a whole team with the grappling irons."

Meanwhile, Don Sombrero was galloping rapidly away from the village, and, as his way took him near Arcadia, he looked earnestly at the house.

"They have not yet retired, but I suppose there is no hope of seeing her. I wish I could, for I want to deny any share in the mail-robery, but she will probably hear of the placard in the village and believe it, as women are prone to do. Ah! Octavia, to what fate will your acquaintance with me lead you? It pains me to deceive her so, but I have a great work to do and must not falter. And Laura, too—she is trusting and believing, trusting in the man that seeks the ruin of herself and family. What an evil fate!"

His head dropped lower and he rode on in moody silence. Whatever his past or prospective crimes, he was not without a conscience, and all his manhood was rebelling against his sins.

In his abstraction he did not realize that his horse had relapsed into a walk, nor did he suspect the proximity of any one else until the steed suddenly tossed his head.

Don Sombrero looked up suddenly. By the side of the road, evidently waiting for him to pass, stood a woman, but no sooner did he see her than he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

He had recognized her, and the discovery could not but be mutual.

"Miss Austin!" he said, quickly.

"Yes, it is I," she answered, more quietly than he, and seemingly at a loss what to do.

"I am very glad to see you."

"You owe all to chance. I was out walking with Laura, but we became separated somehow and I took a different way home from what I intended."

"I thank the chance which made it so, for I was wishing very much to see you. You have heard of the robbery of the stage?"

"Yes," answered Octavia, quietly.

"Have you no reproof for me?"

"I do not wish to condemn you unheard."

"I wish every one was as lenient," he said, in a changed voice. "The people at the village have cursed my very name ever since that affair, but I have to-night given them the lie direct."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I am not the man who robbed the stage."

"Then they were mistaken," said Octavia, her face growing lighter.

"They were, but it was a natural error on their part. The deed was done by some one made up to look exactly like me, and in order to throw the blame on me he even announced that he was Don Sombrero."

Miss Austin came nearer to the masked rider.

"Pardon me, sir," she said, eagerly, "but is this the truth?"

"It is, upon my word of honor. Don Sombrero is not an assassin, and since we were together in the cave I have made few forays against my fellow-man."

"I am very glad. After the conversation we had I did not want to look upon you as a wicked man, and I was deeply troubled when I heard of the stage robbery. I am glad, sir, that you are free from that deed."

"Will you give me your hand, Miss Austin?"

She did so, frankly, and he raised it to his lips.

"May heaven bless you," he said, with an unsteady voice. "Your goodness overpowers me; but Don Sombrero has some manhood still left."

"I trust that he has enough to forever forsake this life of peril."

"Octavia—Miss Austin—I promised you that when we met again you should have my answer, but I am afraid it will hardly be satisfactory. I am not yet quite ready to forsake the road, but the great work of my life is slowly moving to an end, and when the climax comes, Don Sombrero will be seen no more."

"The delay of a day may be fatal to you."

"You speak truly, but I am bound by vows I dare not break to accomplish my end, and I cannot yet turn back. I know that is a very unsatisfactory answer, but I am not worthy of a thought from you, anyway, Miss Austin."

"I believe you are worthier than you know, and I wish you would reveal your identity to me and let me help you if I can."

"You are helping me more than you know already, and you can do no more at present. As for my identity, when I cast off this mask, you, and you alone, shall know afterward that I was Don Sombrero."

For some time longer they remained in conversation, and both forgot the passage of time; but the sound of horses' hoofstrokes down the road aroused the road-agent.

He said adieu in a voice which was always musical when addressing Octavia, pressed her hand and rode away.

"Oh, my soul!" he said, almost with a groan, as he rode away. "What a villain I am. I am leading this woman on to her ruin, and in my heart I love her madly. The sight of her face almost swerves me from my purpose—But no, no; I must not, will not forget my vow of vengeance. The Austin family must go down to ruin together, the innocent with the guilty!"

With a fierce jerk at the rein, unneeded upon his gallant horse, he turned into the field and rode on, looking sharply to the right and left.

Ere long he reached a grove of trees and bushes, and dismounting, led the horse inside and tied him to a branch.

Then he removed his serape, sombrero and mask and rolled them into a bundle, which he concealed under the bushes.

"Remain here for awhile, old boy," he said, patting the neck of his horse. "I have work to do in which you cannot help me, but I will soon return."

He left the grove and walked rapidly away toward the south, strong in the faith that no eye had been watching him.

In this he was mistaken.

Laura Austin, separated by chance from Octavia, had hurriedly taken to cover at the approach of a horseman, and in the big hat and serape she could not fail to recognize Don Sombrero.

Scarcely daring to breathe, she had kept her cover while he was in the trees, but when he went away her gaze was upon him, and as she saw him without his disguise, her face grew deathly pale.

"Merciful heaven!" she cried, "it is Theodore Rivers!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

AND then, as the road-agent went away, Laura stood with clasped hands and a look in her eyes which was like that one may see in those of a frightened deer.

At the least, it was a great shock, for she had never thought of connecting rich, handsome and talented Rivers with the dread outlaw, and it seemed a terrible thing that it should be so.

But, to Laura, the discovery had a deeper import.

"He Don Sombrero!" she uttered, as the man disappeared. "Oh, in mercy's name, what does it mean? Did I see aright? No, it cannot be that it was he."

She tried to believe there was a mistake, but it is hard to doubt the evidence of one's own eyes, and she had seen him too plainly to doubt. Face and form, hair and mustache—all were as she had seen them in him.

Minutes passed before she stirred, but she was staring into the darkness with a look of agony on her fair face.

"An outlaw and—I love him!" she moaned. "Oh, Theodore, my darling, my lost lord, what does it mean? An hour ago I was proud to acknowledge to myself how much I cared for you, that you were my master, but now—now—"

With a little cry she covered her face with her hands, but, after a time, grew calmer.

"I must guard his terrible secret. No one suspects it except me, and I will never be the means of betraying him. Not even Viola and Octavia shall have my confidence, and I pray that he may meet with no harm."

Arising, at length, she turned and walked toward the house. Near the door she chanced upon Octavia, but, beyond a few light remarks, nothing was said. Both had a secret to conceal, but it was of a very different nature.

"He is noble and good, in spite of his faults," Octavia was thinking, "and I will reclaim him yet. He is too much a man to go to ruin. I know it, even though I never saw his face!"

And Laura was thinking:

"How is my idol shattered! I would as soon have thought my father a criminal, but I will never betray him. Oh, Theodore, Theodore!"

How strange is fate, and how strangely these two women were drifting to ruin! Sad will be the day when they discover of what common clay their idol is made.

They paused for a moment to talk gayly to Judge Austin and then went to their rooms.

"They are very fair to look upon," said he, as they went away, and his stern face was softer than usual. "It is the way of the Austin ladies—all are lovely and talented, and it is no idle boast to say none of them ever brought discredit on the family name. Well may the race be proud, for what is nobler than fair women and brave men."

His paper had fallen from his hand, and, for some time, he looked at vacancy in silence.

"Why is it," he muttered, anon, "that the memory of that deed comes back to me tonight? I thought the skeleton forever buried, but it comes now like a ghost at the banquet."

He abruptly arose, gave a few directions to the servants and went to his private room.

In one corner stood an old trunk, and upon this he fastened his gaze.

"They say that a murderer can not keep away from the scene of his crime, and, perhaps, that is what draws me here now, though years have passed since I had such a feeling as this. Something impels me to unlock that box, and I will satisfy the horrible curiosity."

Drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket, he opened the trunk. It was filled with a miscellaneous collection of articles, but he brushed them aside and, from the bottom of all, produced a small wooden box.

He placed on a table, and then, having locked the door and dropped the curtains, he selected a small key and thrust it into the box. There was a click and he turned the cover back.

No jack-in-the-box or grinning skull met his gaze—only a pistol of obsolete pattern, lying on a folded woolen cloth.

He raised the weapon and looked at it closely.

"Scarcely a speck of rust upon it, although it has laid so many years. Why the fiends don't decay seize upon it and eat away barrel and breech? It will be a skeleton in the closet as long as it remains, but, somehow, I can not throw it away. I was a fool that I did not pitch it overboard the night of that tragedy, but I have preserved it as though it was a jewel."

Raising the hammer, he snapped it viciously, but, for ten years, it had been empty and harmless.

"Accursed thing, and thrice accursed the hour when I purchased it. That deed was the only one in my life of which I am ashamed, but, with the blood of the Austins in my veins, I suppose I would do the same thing again."

Beside the box a cigar case had laid as company. This the judge raised and read the inscription on the cover with a slight tremor about his bearded lips.

"J. W. C. to E. A."

That was all—a series of abbreviations which told little to a stranger, but one full of recollection to Edward Austin.

"Why do I keep these things?" he muttered, impatiently. "There can be no danger, but I am a fool to have them around. By my life, I will no longer endure it. Late as it is, I will go out and bury them beneath the sod!"

Acting on the hasty resolution, which was something very unlike him, he closed and relocked the trunks, and then, after thrusting the pistol and cigar-case in his pocket, equipped himself for the outer air.

As he passed through the garden, he saw Duke Dorval sauntering about at a distance, but, without speaking to him, he passed through the gate, locking it behind him, and went on in the open field.

"This is a Quixotic expedition," he muttered, "and I ought to have known better. I am acting like a boy, but, now I have started, I will forever dispose of these articles."

After a little reflection he walked toward a grove of trees which grew near the road, finally pausing near the center of the place.

"Dark as Egypt!" he muttered, "but a fit time and place for my work."

Drawing a knife from his pocket, he knelt at the foot of a tree and began scooping a hole in the dirt with the blade. He kept on until he had gone down for two feet, and then deposited the pistol and cigar-case at the bottom, covered them up with earth and restored the top as nearly as possible to its former appearance.

"It is done, and they will no longer haunt me as they have done for ten years. Dampness and decay will soon remove the last sign."

With these words he turned and strode away from the grave, not once looking behind him.

He would not have felt so satisfied had he known that while he worked he had been watched, and that, too, by a man in a big hat and cloak, who had all the while been standing beside a black horse, keeping him quiet to avoid alarm.

But now, this man, whom we recognize as Don Sombrero, advanced to the side of the tree with a look of wonder on his face.

"What in the world has the old villain been burying here? It may be nothing of interest to me, but I am going to discover."

So saying, the road-agent knelt beside the tree and began digging vigorously. In a few minutes he had unearthed the pistol and cigar-case, and he held them up in wonder.

"Now, then, here is a mystery. Why should he bury these simple articles? I'll take a closer look at 'em."

He struck a match and looked at the pistol, but the transient glimmer showed him nothing of interest. Then, by the light of a second, he surveyed the cigar-case, and a hoarse cry fell from his lips.

"J. W. C. to E. A." Good heavens; they

are his initials. What does it mean? Ha! I think I see. This little thing was presented by him to Edward Austin before—before—"

He paused and turned both articles over in his hands, his powerful eyes suddenly dimmed by what looked like tears.

"His hands have touched this little trinket, and it was his present to the judge. What has caused him to keep it all these years? More than that, why does he now bury it here? And the pistol—has that, too, a history?"

The road agent turned the weapon over in his hands for a few moments, and then suddenly started.

"Ha! I think I see. This is the pistol which took his life, and Austin has preserved it and the cigar-case all these years as mementoes. What a horrible taste. Is the wretch so proud of his crime as that?"

Then he looked toward Arcadia with a renewed glitter in his eyes.

"Go your way for now, villain, but your day of reckoning is coming, and you shall pay the debt to the uttermost. When you and all your family are brought to the dust, then will your crime be avenged. These articles you have so strangely buried I will keep but some day they shall meet your gaze again."

He refilled the hole, arranging the earth as he had found it, and then, with the pistol and cigar case gripped in his hand, mounted his black horse and rode away from the grove.

And while he was swearing vengeance on all of the Austin blood, Octavia was sinking to sleep with a prayer on her lips for wild and wayward Don Sombrero.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WILDER IN A NEW ROLE.

THE citizens of Mount Tabor had seen a good many angry men since the town grew up at the base of the mountain, but Sheriff Roberts rather beat the record when he heard of Don Sombrero's last exploit.

It was a piece of impudence, looking at the matter from the official's point of view, for the road-agent to dare express his opinion on a placard to the people of Mount Tabor, but that he should dare to ride into the very heart of the village when everybody was astir, was more than he could tamely bear.

Business had taken Roberts away early in the evening, and it was late when he returned; but, late as it was, a crowd sallied out of the Casino to receive him and break the news gently.

Among the number were Ben Braxton, Jonathan, Joe Pike, Cheerful Abe, Pablo Diaz and Major Jones, and they, in common with their associates, were anxious to see how he would take it.

They found out when, after telling their story they preceded him to where the road-agent's placard hung beside his own, for he read it and then burst into a torrent of profanity.

"Why didn't you kill the cuss?" he demanded, when he regained his command of civilized English.

"He didn't wait," said Jonathan, dryly.

"Didn't he?" sneered the sheriff, with a hysterical laugh. "Curse it, did you expect he was going to hang around and play poker while you wiped out your sixes? Why didn't you wade in and kill him? One well-aimed shot would have settled him."

"If I remember right, you matched coppers with him one night," said a voice from the crowd.

"Yes, I did, but he dropped on me when I was insensible and tied me up like a child. All I ask is a fair meeting with him and I'll show you whether he is so mighty a warrior."

"Talk is cheap."

"Who spoke?" roared the sheriff.

No one answered.

"Is there any one here that dares insinuate I am afraid to meet Don Sombrero?"

"Don't all speak ter onct," said Joe Pike, looking around the Mount Taborites.

"I reckon the man who spoke don't care to back up his words," said Roberts, belligerently.

"Guess he is struck dumb," added Pike.

Evidently, no one wanted to call the sheriff a coward, but he had few friends among the men and they kept his anger boiling for some time before he left them and went to his home.

Then the crowd broke up, some to return to the Casino and others to seek their quarters.

Cheerful Abe had managed to intimate to his allies that he wanted speech with them, and they followed him one side.

"My worthy corners," he said, "I wished to say that I am about to leave Mount Tabor for a short time, maybe one day, maybe more. Of course, we must let the immense fortune of the mound alone for a few days, so the Triad won't suffer by my flitting. I am going out on the stage, to-morrow, in my own proper character."

"Caramba! Roberts will recognize you," said Diaz.

"I'll look out for that. I traveled too long with the N. E. & C. circus to be beat by a one-horse sheriff. Besides, he has got his hands full to catch Don Sombrero. Ha! ha! didn't he swear some, though? I ain't seen a madder man since our living skeleton died."

"What living skeleton?"

"Oh! I was referring to the circus. It was the manager who was mad when the l. s. died. Poor fellow! he would often express concern for his health when we were lacing him up for the night—it was our only bolt; he would have been as fat as Daniel Lambert if he hadn't laced—and he went the way of all good men."

Pablo and Major Jones did not ask why Wilder was going to leave the town, but it was because he had heard that the daughters of Judge Austin were going on the stage that he was going to travel the same road.

Light-headed and treasure-absorbed as the ex-bare-back rider was, he had a pair of eyes of excellent quality. He had seen the fair Viola and admired her, and he was going on the stage for the express purpose of "making an impression."

He had no fear that he would be recognized either as the circus man or Cheerful Abe if he assumed his real character. Since the days of the N. E. & C. he had grown a mustache and ample head of hair, and he would little resemble the uncouth Abraham.

The following day, when the stage rolled out of the village, it contained but three passengers. These were Laura and Viola, and a handsome young man whom they did not recognize.

They were going to the neighboring town to make purchases, but, if they had given this information to the quiet male passenger, who sat poring over a paper, it is doubtful if he would have made an equally truthful explanation of his business.

All his attention was fixed on his paper, but, if he had not looked well to that point in advance, he could not have told whether the sheet was right or wrong side up.

With all his confidence, and he had an abundance of it, he did not know how to open negotiations with his fair companions. They were not of a class to be familiarly approached, and he feared that his most elaborate opening would be coldly met.

Luck gave him a chance, and one he did not expect. It was nothing more than the sudden dropping of one corner of the stage, caused by the wheel suddenly parting from the axle, but it threw Wilder off his seat, and only his agility saved him from going into the faces of the ladies.

"There is almost a demand for an apology, but perhaps I had better see the extent of our mishap first of all," he said, laughing.

"It may be the outlaw herdsmen or Don Sombrero," said Viola, somewhat anxiously.

Laura changed color but made no comment.

Wilder was vainly trying to open the door, but, just then, it swung away and the face of the driver appeared in the opening.

"No occasion for alarm," he reassuringly said. "The loss of a pin let the wheel loose, but it is an accident soon remedied."

All alighted, and, while the Jehu went in search of the pin, Wilder improved the opening by continuing the conversation.

In five minutes they were on their way again, but, finding the ladies not inclined to snub him, the ex-bareback-rider politely continued his remarks.

"We are fortunate to have no greater mishap, since this is a stamping-ground of Don Sombrero," he said.

"He denies that he committed the stage robbery," said Laura, quickly.

"The word of a road-agent does not amount to much, I fear. But you spoke of the outlaw herdsmen—who are they, pray."

"A band of road-agents who have their quarters south of here. They seldom venture near this place."

"I have little to tempt them if they should appear," said Wilder, smiling.

"They might take our lives. They are made up of the worst elements to be found in California, and men seldom resist them."

"In that case, I suppose it would not be prudent to try my revolvers on them."

"It would be suicide. They have no mercy when their will is thwarted."

"The authorities ought to put an end to such work. The population is becoming quite numerous about here, and there is no more need of them than there is of poetry in a circus."

The last words had thoughtlessly passed his lips and he immediately looked annoyed, but, beyond a faint smile, the ladies showed no sign of having heard them.

The ice, however, was well broken, and, as the stage rolled on, he kept talking in what he meant for an interesting manner.

Judging from appearances, he succeeded well, nor is it to be wondered at. He was intelligent, fairly educated and shrewd, and such a man generally succeeds in being agreeable when he tries.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PRACTICAL OUTLAW.

THE stage was rolling through a dense piece of woods at a good pace. The driver was on the box, singing for his own benefit in a subdued key and erratic fashion, and the three passengers whiled away the time in conversation.

Nothing could be more peaceful than the scene—it rivaled a stage of New England.

But, on many stages, the scene is liable to abruptly change, and the one piloted by Joe Gardner was no exception to the rule.

He drove around a curve in the road, plaintively singing "Baby Mine," and then pulled up as suddenly as though the baby in question was directly in front of his wheel.

If such had been the case it would not only have been a romantic event but a singular coincidence. It would have been lucky for the travelers if it had been so, but it was the sight of a dozen full-grown men, all with rifles apparently growing out of their shoulders, which had brought old Joe to his halt.

He took one good look at the ominous gang and then sat like a statue.

"Halt!" said one of the strangers.

"It is done," Joe answered, a little nervously.

Two men advanced to his horses' heads.

"Hands above your head!"

"Up she goes," said Joe, promptly obeying.

"Keep them there."

"You bet."

"Who have you got inside?"

"Two females and one male pilgrim."

"The females are Judge Austin's daughters?"

"Yes," said Joe, in surprise.

"Who is the man?"

"Don't know."

"He's lost?"

"Yes."

"That will do."

The speaker walked to the stage door and opened it with a jerk. Wilder had been wrestling with it, in an attempt to learn the cause of the fresh stoppage, but as a glittering "six" was thrust into his face, he began to see clearly.

"Hold on!" he said, quickly but coolly. "Turn your pepper-box the other side up with care. Use no hooks."

"Come out of here," was the sharp command.

"Cert. Please stand back and give the mourners a chance."

He was not frightened, nor yet subdued, but he wanted to count noses before beginning an exchange of lead with the strangers. One sweeping glance was enough to satisfy him, however, that fighting was out of the question.

"Give me your sixes."

Wilder promptly obeyed.

"You are a sensible man. Now, ladies, I will trouble you to alight."

"Sir," said Laura, pale-faced but calmer than might have been expected, "what does this mean?"

"I spoke good English. Alight and you shall see."

"Do not anger him," said Viola. "I do not think they will harm us."

She gave good advice, as Laura well knew, and they were soon on the ground.

"Now," said the outlaw leader, tersely, "I want you to write a letter to Judge Austin."

"To my—"

She paused suddenly, but he finished for her.

"To your father. Here are a pencil and sheet of paper. Write as I dictate."

"What is your object?"

"You are curious, as a woman always is, but I will humor you. I am going to take you to my den, there to be kept until Austin ransoms you. Is that plain enough?"

The girls began to ask for mercy, but he cut them short.

"I swear that no harm shall be done you, but nothing on earth will change my purpose. Will you write?"

There was no help for it, and not daring to arouse the demon in his nature, Laura accepted the pencil and paper.

"Direct to the judge and write as I tell you. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Laura replied.

"Write, 'We have been taken prisoners by San Antonio, the bandit, and will be carried away to his home in the mountains. He means us no harm, and his sole object in capturing us is to secure a ransom from you. He demands one thousand dollars for each of us, and says that if you will be at the Devil's Gorge, at the foot of Terrace Peak, Thursday evening at nine o'clock, he will be ready to treat with you. He warns you against treachery, and bids you seek the record of his past career to discover whether he is in earnest.' Have you written?"

"Yes, sir," Laura answered.

"Sign it, 'Laura and Viola.'"

She obeyed, and San Antonio, as he had called himself, read it slowly through.

"That is all right," he said, and turned to Wilder.

The latter, having heard what had been said, was wondering what would be done with himself.

"Who are you?" the bandit tersely asked.

"Peter Dalrymple, sir," was the prompt reply.

"Who will ransom you?"

"The Lord knows; I don't."

"Haven't you any friends?"

"Not that I know of."

"I must have a ransom for you."

"I don't know who would give a picayune to

save my skin. If the N. E. & C. was near here, the tattooed man and the fat woman might chip in and raise a stake of a hundred dollars or so, but they are many a weary mile away."

"What rubbish is this?"

"It ain't rubbish at all. It is a stubborn fact. Lord love ye, general, nobody will ransom me. I'm a lone tree, a blasted pine, and it will be blasted hard to make a raise on me. You've lifted my sixes, so my only collateral is the seventy-three cents I have in my vest-pocket. If you'll take that I'll call it square and ship for a more salubrious clime."

Wilder spoke very seriously, but San Antonio turned to his men.

"Go through the stage," he commanded.

And then old Joe once more saw the mail-bag in profane hands, but he kept his own arms well up and said nothing.

When sure that no more valuables remained, the outlaw leader relieved him of his weapons and gave him Laura's note instead.

"Turn your horses' heads toward Mount Tabor and drive like Tam O'Shanter. When you reach the village give this letter at once to Judge Austin. Do you hear?"

"Ay, ay, sir," said Joe, promptly.

"Then levant!"

The driver promptly turned his carriage and, applying the whip, dashed away at a pace which must have astonished his animals.

"There goes our last hope," muttered Wilder, disconsolately. "It is a more serious occasion than when the Queen of the Air eloped with a hostler."

San Antonio had done his business and did not propose to tarry long. Horses were led from the bushes, and, among them, one each for Laura and Viola, but there was none for Wilder.

Seeing the outlaw look at him thoughtfully, he ventured a remark.

"Don't let me spoil the matinee. I'm a patient man, and, if you say so, I'll wait until you send a carriage and four after me."

"Ride behind that man," and the captain pointed to one of the band who sat on a large horse.

Wilder did not wait to have the order repeated, but scrambled into his place and the ride was begun.

San Antonio went to the front of the wild band and a gallop was begun toward the south, though, even with the information contained in the letter, none of the prisoners knew enough of the vicinity to have any idea where they were going.

The leader of the Triad, however, took care to note every prominent landmark so that, in case he could manage to escape, he would be able to find his way back.

The ladies had resigned themselves to the inevitable. They had been long enough in California to know the uselessness of an appeal to the outlaws, and they could only make the best of a bad matter and wait for Judge Austin to ransom or rescue them.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE OUTLAWS' HOME.

A RIDE of about twenty miles took the party to the vicinity of the cave where San Antonio's band had their quarters. During this time their course had been through open fields, but, as they turned their faces toward the mountains, the eyes of the prisoners were bandaged.

Then they rode among the gulches for half an hour in a zigzag course, gradually moving upward, and, at last, a halt was made and the three captives dismounted.

They went by a rocky way for a hundred yards, and then a change in the atmosphere betrayed the fact that they had entered a cave.

Five minutes later they were halted, the bandages removed from their eyes, and, looking about, they saw they were in a cave chamber of considerable size. San Antonio and five of his followers were visible, and the captain smiled faintly as they curiously scanned the place.

"What do you think of it, ladies?" he asked.

"It is well enough in its way," Laura answered, with a steadiness which surprised her, "but I would prefer to make the visit under different circumstances."

"Still, you might be worse off. You are not threatened with any dire calamity; you will be well treated and promptly released when your ransom is paid."

Laura did not reply, but she knew her father's stern nature well enough to be sure that he would pay no ransom until all other means had failed. If fighting ensued, it might arouse the outlaw to such a pitch of fury that his mood would become more dangerous.

"I have fitted up a room for you where you will be very comfortable," said San Antonio, "though you must not expect gas or water improvements. A pine torch and a bucket of Adam's ale must content you. I'll call your attendant."

He whistled twice, and then, after a little delay, a girl emerged from a passage at the further side of the room and advanced toward them.

Wilder, who had an attentive eye for female loveliness, looked at her in surprise.

She was probably twenty years of age, and as well formed and pretty a girl as he could wish to see. Though without any traces of coarseness, she was evidently very rugged, the result, doubtless, of a wild life among the hills, and Nature had plainly been in a kind mood when endowing her with gifts of birth.

Her costume was one suitable for her life, and, in color, a tasteful mixture of red and black, profusely beaded, and it struck him that she would make a good model for a sculptor who wished to form an outlaw queen.

"Marah," said San Antonio, "I have brought your guests as I expected."

She nodded, glancing at the trio without any evidence of pity or emotion, and then he turned to Laura and Viola.

"You are to go with her. She will care for you attentively, but you might as well try to tribe the mountain itself. Eh, Marah?"

"Yes, sir," she calmly answered.

He waved his hand, and she preceded the two prisoners from the chamber, while San Antonio turned to Wilder.

"I am not so sure what I had better do with you," he said.

"Beggars shouldn't be choosers, but I hope you won't oblige me to stretch hemp," the ex-bare-back rider answered.

"You don't want to die?"

"No."

"But you have no friends."

"None that could raise a stake such as you demand. They might play penny-ante, but they couldn't buy up even a blasted pine like me."

"Then I don't see as I shall be able to make much off of you."

"I'm sorry for you, really."

"What is your business?"

"None at present."

"But you have worked in your day?"

"Oh, yes, and I can't be beat in my line. If you want a moral show for your amusement, I will give it, and, if you don't object, pass the hat when it is over and let the proceeds go toward a ransom."

"Are you an actor?"

"Only a bare-back rider."

"Why did you leave the show?"

"I got ambitious, and when the boss cut down the wages several of us left. The tiger-tamer went in search of Sir John Franklin, the tight-rope walker skipped for Europe, the fat woman went East, and I came to Mount Tabor."

"How did you propose to earn your living?"

"By digging for gold."

"Did you fail?"

"I have, so far."

"Well, perhaps I shall have a proposition to make to you by-and-by. For the present, I'll send you to a cell. You shall be well treated, for I think you are a man of my own kind. I admire a cool, brave, philosophical man."

"Shall I give the moral show to please the boys?"

"Not to-day, but I'll reflect on the matter. Roger, take the prisoner, and see that you use him well."

Wilder was led away, and San Antonio looked after him thoughtfully.

"There is good stuff in the fellow, and if I find he has no conscience, I'll offer him a position in the band," he said to himself.

Wilder was taken to a cell, which was a small den off of the main chamber, partly natural and partly artificial, while the wooden door at the entrance had stout bars upon it. The furniture was a table, two chairs, and a bed made of pine boughs with a couple of blankets on top.

"Are you hungry?" Roger asked.

"Famishing," Wilder answered, with a grimace which set the man in good-humor.

"Marah will bring you food afore long."

And then the robber departed, barring the door behind him, and the prisoner looked critically around.

"Nothing sumptuous about the place, but better than I've put up with before now. Reckon I can stand the pressure if the robber girl totes food enough for me. I want a good look at her. If my eyes didn't deceive me, she is a clipper, and maybe, I shall be able to touch her stony heart."

He sat down and lighted a pipe, which had been left him, and the room was full of smoke when the girl-outlaw entered.

"Excuse me," Wilder said, promptly rising. "I would not have started such a smudge if I had known you were coming so soon."

She smiled, and seemed to grow more handsome than ever.

"I am accustomed to it," she answered. "I have brought you food, and hope you will relish it."

"I haven't a doubt on that point. I can tell a good dinner at forty rods, for, to tell the truth, I seldom get nearer to one than that."

Hungry as he had declared himself to be, he showed no inclination to attack the food, but she speedily withdrew, and he turned his attention to the lesser attraction.

"A mighty fine girl," he muttered between

great mouthfuls. "It won't be time thrown away to play the agreeable to her."

And so, when she entered to take away the remains, he tried his luck, but without any perceptible effect. She lingered and listened to what he had to say, but there was no evidence that she was inclined to mercy.

"Have you been long in this business?" he asked.

"My home has always been in the mountain."

"Is this San Antonio any relative of yours?"

"No, I have no relatives."

"Probably if your father had lived you wouldn't be here now."

"He was once captain of this band, and he had two stout sons. They were killed ten years ago, when I was a child, and I have been with San Antonio since."

It was more of a confidence than he had expected, and perhaps more than she had intended, for she began to abruptly gather up the dishes.

"Are you going to leave me alone?" he asked.

"I have work to attend to," she answered, quietly.

He expressed a hope that she would call again, but her reply was not very encouraging, and she left the den and barred the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RESCUE PARTY.

THE following day, a little before noon, a party of horsemen was riding through a valley at the foot of the hills wherein was the den of San Antonio.

In the party were several men well known to the reader—Judge Austin, Theodore Rivers, Sheriff Roberts, Dick Meeker, Joe Pike and others, and it needs only this statement for the reader to comprehend that it was a company formed to search for the missing daughters of the judge.

Mount Tabor had been shaken to the heart when old Joe drove the empty stage back and told his story, and, among the other angry men, Edwards Austin raged like a compressed tornado.

It was bad enough that outlaws should roam over the soil unchecked; worse still that they should molest the mail, and simply outrageous that their ruthless hands should fall on men and women; but when they went so far as to molest his daughters, and demanded a ransom for their release, the climax of infamy was reached.

"I will ransom them with the sword!" he cried, in the language of the ancient gladiator of Rome, and the crowd took fire from his words.

In a short time a band of thirty resolute men had been enlisted and a half-breed engaged as a trailer, and when another day opened they were resolved to hunt the outlaws to their doom.

Pablo Diaz and Major Jones had been among those who volunteered, for, though old Joe had not known the solitary male passenger, they were pretty sure it was their leader, but Roberts had rejected them as of no use and the faithful "corners" found themselves left behind.

The party had been at the scene of the stage-outrage at daylight, and then the half-breed at once lifted the trail, so they were fast nearing the place appointed by San Antonio for an interview when we introduce them to the reader.

Rivers and some of the lesser lights had advised a far different policy. The former had urged that the plan of the outlaw be accepted, so far as meeting him was concerned, and then either seize him as a counter-hostage or run him into some trap, but his views had been ridiculed by Roberts and rejected by the judge.

Consequently, the idea was to trail the gang to their haunt.

Rivers no longer offered advice. He was not sulking because his views had been rejected, but he saw that Roberts ruled the day and he was willing to give him a chance.

Joe Pike pressed to his side as they went on.

"We're a-gittin' nigh the bivouac," said the Forty-niner.

"So they tell me."

"The hot-headed fools won't do nothin'. This thing will end in smoke. Didn't San Antonio warn 'em not ter try violence? They are durned leather-heads."

"It won't take them long to try their luck," said the Cavalier, quietly.

"They could hav tried that at ther Casino an' done jest es much good. I've fit outlaws more nor oncet sence '49 an' I know their way."

"I have no hope from this venture."

"Still, it's a pity ter let them gals be held by ther Philistines. I rayther cotton to 'em, don't you?"

"They are fine women."

"Now you speak it. Lord! I've got eyes in my head ef my ha'r is variegated by time, an' ef I war twenty year younger I dunno but I would shine around 'em a bit. Eh?"

"It would be your privilege, certainly."

"O' course. That is, you an' me think so,

but I spose ther judge would turn up his nose at Joe Pike."

The veteran, who had always liked Rivers, talked on for some time, but they suddenly arrived at the point where the abductors had taken to the higher land and idle conversation was suspended.

The half-breed dismounted, and, with him still in advance, they went on slowly.

He showed remarkable shrewdness at his calling, and, though the trail was often lost among the rocks, he would manage to find it further along.

"Roberts is interested," said Joe Pike, anon. "See how anxious he looks. He's afraid his sweetheart is in trouble. That's Laura, you know."

Rivers frowned, but made no reply. The last words had not pleased him.

A little further on the trail ended abruptly, nor could the half-breed find further sign.

"They have doubled on their tracks," said Roberts.

"Very likely," added Austin.

"You are wrong," said the half-breed, quietly.

"What then?" Roberts sharply asked.

"They have muzzled their horses' feet by binding them with buckskin or cloth."

Rivers, who chanced to be looking at the sheriff, saw a look of annoyance pass over his face. He seemed angry at any opinion or will opposed to his.

"It strikes me that is more romantic than probable as a theory," he derisively said.

"Outlaws are seldom practical," observed Joe Pike.

Roberts darted an angry look at him.

"You seem well posted in regard to them."

"I've see'd a few since '49."

"Too many to be longer a judge," said Roberts turning away.

It was the general opinion, however, that the half-breed's theory was correct, and they separated into small parties and began a systematic search for the cave they felt sure must be near.

Somehow, Judge Austin and Roberts strayed some distance from the others, and they were passing through a ravine when, without any warning, a sharp voice shouted the old, familiar command:

"Hands above your heads!"

They turned quickly, only to see three men on each side of them with rifles raised and leveled, the muzzles covering their breasts, hammers raised, and a general look of dead-earnestness about their possessors.

Judge Austin's hand dropped on his revolver, but he who had before spoken, a resolute-looking fellow who stood a little apart from the others, sharply added:

"Hold, where you are. Try to draw a six, and, by heavens, off goes your heads!"

"Don't resist!" said Roberts, quickly. "We must beat these fellows by cunnin'."

"For the last time, will you put your hands above your heads?"

The judge's face was almost purple from rage, but he saw the sheriff obeying and he followed suit.

"That is better. Now, gents, do you know me?"

"No," growled Roberts.

"I am San Antonio. I believe you were looking for me."

"Yes, sir, I was," said Austin, hotly. "I have come to rescue my daughters."

"Two thousand dollars will do the business."

"Two thousand devils! I will not pay a cent, you villain, and, unless you give them up peaceably, I will blow your whole gang to Tophet."

San Antonio elevated his eyebrows.

"How will you do it?" he coolly asked.

"I have plenty of men at my back."

"Keep them there, for there they will do the most good. If you had all California with you, it would make no difference. You can not find my cave, and the only way to recover your daughters is to agree to my terms."

"Never, sir, never!" Austin declared.

"Don't be hasty; better say you think you never will. You evidently mean war. Now, what is to hinder me from taking you two to my fold with the other lambs."

"Oh! you've got the drop on us now," Roberts acknowledged, "but our day will come."

"You had better keep still. I'm not talking with you," Sam Antonio curtly said.

"I am backing this gentleman with the law," the sheriff declared.

The outlaw laughed disdainfully.

"A fig for you and the law. Now, Judge Austin, I will give you a last chance. Will you agree to my terms?"

"No," was the hot reply.

"In that case I will bid you good-day for now. I'll let you try your own way until you see the folly of it and are ready to cry for quarter. While we are going you must keep your hands up and remain quiet, or off goes your heads. Do you understand?"

The judge looked eagerly around him. He would have given much for a sight of his allies, but not a man was visible.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW THE PLAN WORKED.

As the judge turned his gaze back to the scene before him, he was amazed to see Roberts suddenly spring from his saddle and rush toward the outlaw captain.

Brave as he was, the act looked to him like suicide, but San Antonio withheld his fire, perhaps because he was afraid to use his revolver when so near the searchers, and prepared to meet the sheriff empty-handed.

Austin's chance for joining in the affray ended abruptly as one of the men glided forward and thrust his revolver almost into the judge's face.

"Keep your hands where they are," he tersely said.

And then they saw Roberts and San Antonio grapple like gladiators, and a desperate struggle began in the lonely ravine. Desperate as it was it soon ended, and Austin could hardly repress a shout as he saw his ally kneeling on the breast of San Antonio.

He had gained a gallant victory, but it availed him nothing. The other men rushed forward, and then Austin groaned as he saw the sheriff dashed to the ground by a blow from a revolver.

He lay perfectly still, and San Antonio speedily arose.

"Take that for a taste of our mettle," he sternly said. "This dog of the law is lucky he does not get a knife-thrust in his heart, but such is not our policy. We are going now, but I swear that if you move before you hear a whistle from the top of the bluff you shall be shot. You will be covered all the while, so keep your hands well up."

A torrent of angry words burst from the judge's lips, but San Antonio heard in indifference. He spoke to his men and they moved away through the gulch, speedily disappearing among the rocks.

Austin was almost foaming with rage, but he had enough wisdom to obey the orders he had received. He remained motionless until the whistle sounded from the bluff—and no longer.

His loud shouts quickly brought half the searchers to his side, where they found him kneeling over Roberts, who was just beginning to stir.

Confusion reigned for awhile, but the sheriff arose to a sitting position, and, with his hands over his head, urged an instant pursuit; so the men darted away, headed by Austin, only to return in half an hour as empty-handed as they went.

The outlaws had not been found.

The entire party of searchers assembled in the gulch, disappointed and angry, but Roberts, who had fully recovered, took it upon himself to console them.

"Never mind," he said. "They have won the first move in the game, but we have discovered that we are on the right track and we will soon make Rome howl."

"Your face is pale, Roberts; that blow was a hard one," Austin solicitously said.

"A mere love-tap. I don't mind it," was the brave reply.

There was a murmur of admiration from some of the men, but Joe Pike saw a curious expression on Rivers's face.

"What do you think on't?" the veteran asked.

"I don't know."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Simply that if the idea was not wild I should believe this affair a put-up job with Roberts as a party thereunto."

"Correct ter a cent!" the miner declared.

"I've see'd suthin' o' Californy life sence '49, an' I allow it ain't ther way o' any galoot who is on his muscle ter let a man ante up ther way ther sheriff did."

"Can it be he is leagued with San Antonio?"

"I don't think no better o' the critter."

"It will not do to say so."

"See hyer, pard, s'pose we keep mum an' play a lone hand. Ef he is up ter any trick, he is bound ter balk this game ef he can, an' the men all think him a saint. Ef you an' me work tergether, we may find a clev."

"Agreed," said Rivers, promptly.

And so, when the party scattered for a fresh search, Pike and the Cavalier kept together and looked very closely, but not the sign of a cave was found by them or any one else.

In brief, the work was kept up all day, and Roberts and Austin urged the men on whenever they wavered, but, if the cave was near, the entrance was too cunningly concealed to be found by ordinary means.

It was a tired, cross and gloomy party that assembled for supper, and Austin had relapsed into tiger-like silence, but the sheriff showed remarkable pluck and confidence, and tried to infuse a part of his own good spirits into the others.

"He is a cunnin' critter," Joe Pike observed to Rivers. "All this works in his favor an' his stock is boomin'. Ef we should find ther gals, he would get all ther credit, an' ther judge would be ready ter go down on his knees to him."

Rivers looked frowningly at Austin.

"Why is the man so infatuated with such a wretend? Has he no eyes?" he asked.

"He sees through a glass, darkly. At least, I reckon that is it, man. I don't know what it means. Yet see, ther judge is sullen. He has set his heart on th' capture o' a sheriff, an' he is stubborn as Pike's Peak. I don't admire either one on 'em."

"I suppose Austin means well."

The veteran looked angry.

"You are ther last man that ought to say that."

"Why so?" Rivers asked, with a start.

"Don't he favor Roberts ag'in' you?"

"I believe he does."

"Course he does, an', fur my part, I'd like ter choke him, jest fur luck."

Rivers did not answer, but, looking at the judge's stern face, played nervously with the handle of his knife.

"This man speaks more harshly than I dare," he was thinking, "but his cause for anger is a mere breath to my own. If I keep my vow, I must hurl Judge Austin to ruin, but—I am not a murderer. Ah! this air stifles me; I must be alone."

He arose and walked from the camp, while the others remained to smoke and rest.

No searching could be done during the night, but Roberts, with his usual energy, suggested that they once more scatter about the place and remain quiet for a few hours before sleeping. Perhaps, in the seeming security, San Antonio would venture out, and so fall into their hands.

All was done as he advised, but, at ten o'clock, they met again and each man acknowledged failure.

"We must now sleep," said Austin, "or we shall be in no condition for to-morrow."

It was good advice, and, spreading their blankets in the best places to be found, they left one man on guard and prepared to get what rest they could.

Rivers and Joe Pike had made a show of camping together in a recess among the rocks, but neither felt like sleeping, and they soon arose and wandered off among the rocks.

The former had taken a fancy to the miner, and was confiding more to him than he had confided to any one else in Mount Tabor, and, as they discussed the events of the day they severely criticised Roberts.

In their opinion, a mistake had been made from the beginning. At that time, they had expressed the opinion that no good would come of an open search, for San Antonio was no boy to leave clues behind him, and the result had thus far justified their views.

"Ef the interview had be'n kept an' a trap laid fur ther varmint, some good might have come on't," said Pike, "but, es much as ther judge has praised Roberts, I say he has made a bad matter a good deal worse."

"If the ladies were strangers to me, I would at once withdraw from the party," answered Rivers.

"You mean, ef you was less interested in Miss Laura," Joe slyly said.

"I understand your point, but Laura Austin can never be anything to me."

"Why not?" the miner asked, in astonishment.

"I am not a marrying man," Rivers almost curtly answered.

"Nor me. Thar was a time when a poooty face woud make my blood b'le, but thar ain't a sinner left."

A long silence ensued, during which both men looked thoughtfully into the darkness, but Rivers suddenly stirred and snuffed vigorously at the air.

"Be you goin' ter sneeze?" Joe carelessly asked.

"I believe I can smell smoke."

"It can't be, fur thar ain't any fires 'round hyer."

"Not unless it is that of the outlaws."

The words stirred Pike into activity, and he, too, used his nostrils critically.

"Durned ef I don't believe you are right," he finally muttered.

They had been sitting on a shelf of rock, but Rivers at once arose.

"If there is smoke, it can have but one origin," he said. "We have built no fires, and, as it is not likely there is a third party near us, the fire must be that of San Antonio."

"Let's go slow an', mebbe, we will find out suthin'. O' course, ther fire ain't out o' doors; they would never be sech fools as that. Therefore, it follers that it must come from some crack in the rocks."

"But where?"

"That is for us ter find. I know thar is smoke in ther air, an' we must line it."

"We will move about slowly until we locate it."

They acted on the idea, but, though they searched carefully, the work was not an easy one. For some time, the smoke seemed a very will-o'-the-wisp. Go where they might within a considerable circle they could smell it the same, but no fissure was found as they expected.

Patience and shrewdness were at last rewarded, however, and they fixed upon a rocky elevation with considerable confidence. There,

large boulders were piled up in confusion, and no sign of a cave was seen, but it seemed a fact that the faintest possible breaths of smoke were creeping out among the rocks.

Fully convinced that the cave lay underneath they finally resolved to return to camp and arouse the men.

Acting on the idea, they soon had a crowd of sleepy, morose-looking felicws about them, but their news stirred most of them into life.

As might be expected, Roberts sneered at their assertions, but for once, Judge Austin was not with him. He had little faith in the new discovery, but he was not the man to leave a stone unturned to accomplish a desired result.

So the march to the elevation was begun, and to Rivers's surprise, the sheriff pushed to the front. The Cavalier could not understand his sudden change of tactics.

"The critter means mischief," said Joe Pike. "Did you observe the look on his face? If he is playin' fast an' loose with our gang, I'll bet yer he has some tarnal scheme afoot. His face is as variegated an' curious ter look upon as a map o' Europe."

"Perhaps he intends to warn San Antonio."

"If he does, I'll snuff his candle fur all time."

They had reached the base of the elevation when the sheriff, who was the foremost man, suddenly darted ahead, but catching his toe on a stone, fell headlong to the ground.

He was on his feet in a moment, however.

"Did you see him?" he excitedly asked.

"See who?" Austin blankly returned.

"I saw a man whisk in among the rocks there, sure as fate. I believe we are on the track, for unless it was some outsider, it must have been one of the outlaws."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WITHIN THE CAVE.

LAURA and Viola had been escorted to a room off the main cave, which was much like the one given to Horace Wilder. What Nature had not done, the outlaws had finished, and the walls were tolerably smooth, while the furniture was both comfortable and pretentious, the spoils, doubtless, of some past raid of the band.

Marah at once left them, but the door was barred behind her and they were securely imprisoned.

"What do you think of the prospect?" Viola asked, with commendable calmness.

"I am afraid father will be two thousand dollars poorer when we again see Arcadia."

"Nonsense! He will gather the people and sweep this den of vipers away like chaff."

"I am not so sure of that. Men who live all the time under the ban of the law, are both shrewd and wary, and I fear San Antonio will outwit them."

"I wish I was like you in one respect."

"What do you mean?"

"I have no lover to rally to my rescue."

"Have it?" Laura asked, in seeming surprise.

"Certainly."

"Whom do you mean? Not Sheriff Roberts, I hope."

"No, indeed. I mean Theodore Rivers."

"Mr. Rivers? What is he to me?"

"Your lover, Laura."

"Now it is my turn to say 'nonsense!' What does he care for me, or—or I for him?"

"I will not presume to answer positively for either of you, but, in my opinion, it is a case of mutual love."

"How can you talk so foolishly, Viola?"

The younger sister laughed merrily.

"Never mind, but we will see if the Cavalier does not come to your rescue."

In this way they talked for some time, trying to be as philosophical over their trouble as possible, but, after some hours, time began to drag, and they were not so very sorry when San Antonio called on them that evening.

He remained for half an hour and repeated his assertion that they need have no fear while in the cave. They had been seized solely with a view to money-making, and when the ransom was paid they would be released unharmed.

Then he went away and called on Wilder.

"How fare you?" he pleasantly said.

"Well, I am getting along pretty salubrious-ly, but I can't say I admire it very much," the prisoner answered.

"Have you been well-fed?"

"Like a lord, your excellency."

"Ob, we live well here."

"So I should say. See here, captain, I've a proposition to make to you."

"Out with it."

"I'll play you any game of cards you say to see whether I stay with you or go free."

"In other words, you want to beat me in lieu of a ransom?"

"I want to try."

"I shall be obliged to refuse, for you are probably an expert with the pasteboards. Now, I'll make a proposition to you."

"Go on."

"You seem to me like just the kind of man I want in my band. How would you like to join?"

Wilder looked sharply at the outlaw.

"Are you in earnest?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is rather unexpected, and, like a timid maiden, I shall have to ask for time to think it over. It is an important question and should not be answered rashly."

"That is sensible," said San Antonio, impressed by the coolness of his prisoner. "I'll give you twenty-four hours for reflection. That takes us forward to the time when Judge Austin will ransom his daughters, you know. If you accept, you shall have good usage and your share of all booty."

"I can ask no more. Perhaps I would make a good knight of the road, for the fat woman of the N. E. & C. always declared I was some day bound to become 'extinguished.' I'll think of it."

San Antonio looked pleased, and then, after a little hesitation, proposed a game of cards. They played, and, at the end of half an hour, the captain went away victorious.

Wilder chuckled when once more alone.

"That was a bait," he commented. "His luck may tempt him to accept my own proposition, in which case I will whip him out of his boots. So he wants me to tie up to his band! The idea is absurd. Bad as I am, I won't turn road-agent. What would my faithful corners say at the thought? The Triad would be busted all to smash and I should never become a rich man. If the tattooed man was in my place he might accept, but no bare-back rider would stoop so low."

He laughed unconcernedly, and then proved his mental serenity by going to bed and soon falling into a tranquil sleep.

In the morning, Marah brought his breakfast and he managed to delay her for some time. He liked her looks and, under any circumstances, would have enjoyed a conversation with her, so that, now he was working his way slowly toward a practical end, he was remarkably fluent of speech.

The girl listened and smiled at his humorous remarks, and he was shrewd enough to perceive a decided change in her manner since their first interview.

"I believe I have made an impression," he said, aloud, after she was gone. "She acts quite amiable, and, before night, I will propose an elopement. But, what if she turns traitor to San Antonio for my sake? It won't do to leave her in the lurch, and I—"

He broke off abruptly and stared at the blank wall for some minutes.

"I'm not sure but that I would prefer her to Viola if she only had money-bags to back her. She is a jewel, and eighteen carat fine at that. I'll see what can be done."

He ate his breakfast in a mood unusually thoughtful for him, for, light-headed as he was, he had a true man's heart under his gay exterior and he had no desire to have the girl get into trouble for him.

"But she must aid me if I can make her, and, after that, I will see that she does not want," was his final decision.

The day wore away wearily enough, and he waited with impatience for her evening visit.

She came, at last, and he looked into her pretty face with a welcoming smile.

"I am delighted to see you," he declared. "You are the good angel of my solitude."

"How can you talk so foolishly?" she answered, but there was no resentment in her voice.

"I speak only the honest truth. I am as lonesome as an orphan kitten here, and when you come you bring sunshine with you."

"Do you mean the food?"

"Now, you mock me, Marah. You know I refer to your own pretty face. There! don't be angry, but I mean all I say."

"You will make me vain," she said, laughing, but there was a suspicious flush on her cheeks.

"Marah, you may think me foolish, but I have been fighting a battle here in my cell wherein you played an important part."

"I?"

"Yes. Do you know that San Antonio has offered me a place in his band?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have been seriously considering the matter, and I have wondered how you would act toward me in such a case."

"I would be your friend," she said, with some embarrassment.

"I have been rash enough to hope for more—that, if I remain here, you may be something more to me than a friend. Marah, do not blame me, but you fill a niche in my heart where I would gladly keep you."

He was speaking very earnestly, but an unusual gravity was on her face.

"I am an outlaw," she sadly said.

"You can shake off the life if you will. The world is broad, and, if you will marry me, I will take you beyond the old life's shadows."

He had not thought to say so much, but, with her face before him, a wave of real tenderness swept over him and he longed to clasp her in his arms.

She did not at once answer his last speech.

"Come, Marah, my mountain girl," he eagerly continued, "what is your decision?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

HAND TO HAND.

SHERIFF ROBERTS's assertion that he had caught sight of a man among the rocks thoroughly aroused the searching party and they pressed forward to the spot.

"There is no entrance here," said Austin, who saw only a confused pile of boulders.

"I am sure I saw a man disappear right in this place," the sheriff doggedly said. "Of course, if he entered here he closed the way behind him, so we must try to find it. Lay hold of these rocks, men, and see what can be done."

"I believe I smell smoke," said one of the men.

"Then we are on the right track. Use your muscle, my brave fellows, and see what will come of it."

Rivers and Joe Pike stood a little back while the others obeyed, and the former, at least, was trying to "size" the sheriff's new departure.

"Plainly, if the cave is found, he wants all the glory," he muttered.

Suddenly Roberts uttered a subdued cry. A big rock had been rolled from its place, and, beyond, a dark hole was plainly seen.

"Keep on," he said, excitedly. "Take this one next."

Two others were dislodged, and then all saw an opening of considerable size yawning in front of them.

"Don't speak above a whisper," said the leader, raising his hand. "We have found the cave, but we must take the outlaws by surprise."

"Let every man get his weapons ready," the judge added.

"We want torches along with us, but we will not light them until needed. The light would betray us," said the sheriff.

Some of the men went for pine knots, but Joe Pike touched Rivers's arm.

"What is a-comin' now?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"It would be mighty easy fur the critter ter lead us inter an ambush ef he means treachery. It may be all a put-up job with San Antonio."

"Should it prove so, Roberts dies on the spot. He shall not live to profit by his treachery."

"Bravo, my boyee, bravo!" the veteran commented.

By the time the men returned with the pine knots all was ready for the venture. The entrance was so narrow that only one could go at a time, and it was Roberts who went first, and when Austin, who followed him, looked around, he found Rivers at his back.

"We may expect hard fighting," he said, a little softened by the sight, for he was aware that the Cavalier had been rebuffed during the campaign.

"I reckon we are good for it," Rivers coolly replied.

"It will be nothing new to me."

The younger man did not answer, for it was no time for talking. They were in utter darkness, slowly feeling their way, but finding rocks on every side and a firm footing underneath. In brief, it was a passage where two men could barely walk abreast, but no one longer doubted that it led straight to San Antonio's den.

Rivers held a revolver in each hand, but he did not know upon whom he might use them. He kept watch of Roberts, so far as was possible, and was firmly resolved to shoot him down at the first sign of treachery.

"If I should drop both him and Austin I should be doing the world a favor," he thought.

"Perhaps no better time will ever come to square the account with the judge; but I am not an assassin."

They had gone fifty yards or more, very slowly and carefully, when Roberts suddenly paused.

"Ain't that a glimmer of light ahead?" he asked.

Austin looked, and he, too, saw what seemed like the reflection from a fire or lighted room.

"We have them at last!" he exclaimed.

"Sh! Do not give the alarm. Pass the word to the men and let them press well forward. When we show ourselves it must be with a rush which will sweep all before us."

This looked very much like business, and Rivers wavered in his belief, but he could not get rid of the impression that Roberts was playing an underhand game of some sort.

They crept forward to where they had seen the light, and then it was evident to all that some one was to be found just beyond the point of rock.

"Remain where you are, and I will take a look," said the sheriff. "We don't want to bark up the wrong tree."

He dropped on his hands and knees and crawled forward, then stopped, removed his hat, and peered beyond the rocky obstruction. Rivers's gaze was fixed upon him, but there was no sign of treachery.

There was a brief pause, and then he came back in the same silent way.

"They are there and San Antonio is with them," he said.

"How many?"

"Not over fifteen. We outnumber them."

"What are our chances?"

"Good. They are in a sort of chamber,

which is well lighted, and a sweep will carry all before us. They are scattered about, smoking and joking, so we need not fear anything. We will make a dash at the very first, and then if they resist, remember they are outlaws and use your weapons freely. The first blow always tells."

His matter-of-fact manner was beyond even the Californian average, but it had its effect on the men and they were eager for the battle.

They crawled ahead until the point was reached, and then Roberts looked back with glittering eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"All ready."

"Then charge!"

Like unchained tigers the man-hunters darted into the chamber, and as the startled outlaws sprung to their feet a tremendous yell echoed through the room. It was the war-cry of the rescuers.

San Antonio had been placidly smoking, with his back against a rock and his eyes lazily closed, but the shout brought him to his feet like a flash.

He saw the intruders rushing toward him, with Roberts and Austin at their head, and in the sight he must have seen the destruction of his band; but only a brief view was given him. The eyes of the sheriff were on him, and as the surprised but fearless robbers began to draw their weapons, a single revolver-shot awoke a thunder-like sound in the chamber.

It was Roberts who had fired, and San Antonio flung up his arms, staggered and fell to the floor.

A cheer arose from the rescuers, but it was drowned in fiercer shouts as the combat became general. The outlaws had no thought of yielding, and both sides began to fire with a rapidity more noisy than deadly, but more than one man fell, and they surged together while keen bowies glittered in the light.

No mode of fighting is so bloody and tragic as a battle with knives. The shortness of the blades renders parry and guard almost out of the question, and those who fight must expect to be badly hurt.

So when the rival parties closed like gladiators, it was a scene too desperate to be described, though fortunately their impetuosity to close made many rush to a grapple rather than to use their knives.

Rivers had pulled trigger on a stout ruffian, but the cartridge failed to leave the barrel, and a blow from the shoulder then sent it whizzing across the room.

The Cavalier was not dismayed, and, seeing that the robber desired a grapple, he sprung forward and they met like tigers. He had secured an advantage of hold, but his opponent was twenty pounds the heavier man and the prospect looked dubious.

Evidently, the outlaw had expected to throw his man at the start, but Rivers kept his feet well under him and secured a lock which nearly won him the first fall.

The outlaw perceived that he had not met a weak boy, as he thought, and a series of attempts on his part showed him that Rivers was not only very muscular, but quick and skillful.

Back and forth they struggled, sometimes knocking against other men, but seeming to be very well matched, though the robber began to breathe heavily.

Anon, the Cavalier saw his chance—he caught the other in a cunning lock, and then, after a brief twisting, the fellow was thrown heavily to the floor.

Before Rivers could take advantage of the fact, the crowd surged against him and he saw the enemy were in full retreat.

"Pursue!" shouted Roberts. "Don't let any of them escape."

The order was easier given than obeyed. The outlaws darted into passages which were rough and dark, and though promptly followed, not one who succeeded in leaving the main chamber was captured. The rescue party returned to the scene of their victory, but it had been sufficiently bloody to dampen their enthusiasm considerably.

Five of the robbers had remained behind, four dead and one mortally wounded, but their destruction had cost two lives from the victors and others had ugly injuries.

They looked in vain for the body of San Antonio. It had disappeared, but a large pool of blood lay where he had fallen, and when one of the wounded Mount Taborites stated that he had seen the chief borne away as a dead weight, it looked as though he had met a deserved end.

Search was made for the prisoners and the first door opened was that of Wilder's cell. He had heard the battle and came out in a philosophical mood, and he breathed freer when he saw no sign of Marah.

He had not been able to persuade her to free him, but she had wavered, and, if time had been given him, he believed he might have conquered her.

Laura and Viola were soon found and released, and then the triumph of the rescue party was complete. The object of their expedition

had been accomplished, and, besides, the band had been given a wholesome lesson, if not destroyed.

All would have been very different had not Rivers and Joe Pike discovered the smoke, but, in spite of that fact, they found Roberts the hero of the hour, as usual. Austin suggested three cheers for him, and they were given with a will, while the Cavalier and his friend received none.

Rivers, however, bore it philosophically. He had received Laura's thanks, and, as her hand lay in his, there had been a look on her face which the sheriff failed to awaken.

Wilder had not forgotten Marah, and, as he did not like to leave her unprotected, he sought for her while the others talked, but there was no trace to be found.

It was deemed advisable to remain in the cave over night, so their horses were brought near and placed under guard, though there seemed no danger of further trouble from the outlaws.

Roberts was anxious to find the body of San Antonio, but a careful search with torches failed to bring it to light, and they decided that it had been concealed in some hole in one of the passages.

The cave was found to be a spacious affair, with another entrance more sizable than that through which they had entered, and it was by this way the survivors of the band had escaped.

No one was in condition to sleep, but they congregated around the fire to get what rest they could before morning, and every one seemed in a tranquil mood.

Roberts did not recognize Wilder, and the latter made himself at home, and, only for thoughts of Marah, would have been entirely at ease.

CHAPTER XXX.

WILDER'S DISCOVERY.

THE rescue party desired to start on their return at daylight, so, before that hour, they made a hearty breakfast on the outlaws' stores and prepared to go.

Only Wilder left with regret, but even after they were in the outer air he did not forget Marah, and he found himself earnestly hoping they would some time meet again.

No one had thought of the necessity of bringing extra horses, but a careful search discovered two which had once belonged to the robbers. These sufficed for Laura and Viola, but Wilder, as usual, was left out in the cold. He accepted the inevitable composedly, and started for the nearest town on foot, declaring he would be in Mount Tabor as soon as the others.

After the start, Roberts continued to make himself so conspicuous that Rivers and Joe Pike grew disgusted and went on ahead at a gallop.

The Cavalier was in a thoughtful mood, and said so little that Joe at last suspected the cause.

"I don't want ter interfere with your business, pardner," he bluntly said, "but I've a word ter say about that darned sheriff of you will hear it."

"I shall be glad to have you speak. What about Sheriff Roberts?"

"I suspect he is a durned rascal ef he is a sheriff, an' I smell mischief ahead fur you ef you don't cut his comb."

"Why so?"

"Wal, between you an' me, he thinks you are his rival fur ther affections o' Miss Laura. I ain't forgot what you said about her, but ther fact remains that he is jealous o' you. Now, I consait he is jest ther kind o' a pison serpent that would cut your throat on ther sly or run you inter some trap, an', unless you look sharp, he is goin' ter do it."

"Do you think so?"

"Yas."

"Well, he can try his luck. We are enemies, as I have already plainly told him, and it shall be wit against wit."

"You know he won't strike open an' man-fashion."

"Undoubtedly you are right."

"Glad you think so. Wal, jest keep your eyes open, an', ef he tries ter ring in a cold deal on you, use your six es an arguifer."

"Thanks for your warning, and I will heed it," Rivers answered, more than ever pleased with the veteran.

They reached Mount Tabor in due time, and, as heralds of the rescue, achieved some little glory which might have made amends to vain men; but neither lost much time in getting to his own quarters.

Afterward, when the main body arrived, there was a good deal of enthusiasm, and, from a dry-goods box, Roberts told the whole story in glowing terms, during which time the word "I" rolled off his tongue as often and as sonorously as though it had been a choice morsel only to be enjoyed by constant mastication.

Truly, he was the hero of Mount Tabor!

By means of hard riding, after securing a horse, Horace Wilder had succeeded in reaching the village with the others, and the leader of the Triad was soon shaking his allies by the hand.

"My faithful corners," he said, "it thrills my bl'od to see you once more. I have been in the lions' den, but, like the other Daniel, I have come out with a whole skin. I see your faces beaming with rapture, and I feel like smiling myself. Let the Triad imbibe!"

The "corners" expressed their intense admiration for their leader, and the three went into the Casino for refreshments, after which Wilder assumed his "Cheerful Abe" disguise and people looked in vain for the handsome young man who had been among the rescued.

That evening, Wilder's curiosity took him near the Austin homestead. In fact, he had become a sort of monomaniac in regard to the mound. Perhaps, if such a thing had been possible, he would have slept and drank on the spot, but the fence intervened, and the judge had built his threatened stone wall about the pile of dirt and surmounted it with a stout iron fence.

"When next the Triad moves," muttered the prowler, "it will be necessary to dig in under the obstruction. Ha! ha! Austin thinks he has done a big thing, but treasure-hunters laugh at stone and iron fences."

A cough sounded just behind him and he wheeled suddenly.

There, not twenty feet away, sat a man upon a black horse, and though the night was dark, he caught a suspicion as he saw a serape and big hat as the most prominent features of all.

"Why do you mutter, Horace Wilder?" the horseman demanded.

"My name is Cheerful Abe, pard," the ex-bare-back rider said, quickly recovering his presence of mind.

"Cheerful Grandmother! Don't try to fool me. Do you know who I am?"

"No; but I am open to conviction."

"I am Don Sombrero."

"I've heerd o' you."

"Anything to my credit?"

"Not an iota."

"I thought so," and the masked man laughed shortly. "But that is neither here nor there. I would like to know why you are so interested in that mound."

"What mound?"

"Over yonder."

"I can't see any mound."

"Nonsense! Don't play with me. I know you are the man who tried to open it the other night, and a word from me would put Judge Austin on your track like a bloodhound."

"Reckon ther word won't be said though."

"Why not?"

"Because you, too, live in a glass house."

"Well argued, and you have nothing to fear from me, but I am curious to know what you want of the mound. Is there treasure there?"

"Treasure? Good Lord! who would put treasure in such a place! Ther idee is absurd."

Don Sombrero made an impatient gesture.

"Have your own way, if you won't trust me, but don't try to make me believe you are not the would-be mound-rober. I know you too well. Likewise, it would be just as well for you to drop your Cheerful Abe lingo. You are Horace Wilder and I know it."

"I wish I knew as much of you."

"I don't doubt it."

"What is to binder me from shooting you as you sit and earning the offered reward?"

"There is much to binder. In the first place, if you should try it, I would perforate you with a forty-one caliber straightway. Agile as you are, I am your superior with a six. But, Wilder, you and I should not be foes. We both have axes to grind, and the fact makes a bond between us."

"Now you hit me plum'-center. Your way is rather to my liking, Don Sombrero, and you will never get a stab, in face or back, from the gentle gorilla of the N. E. & C."

"I'm glad I have one friend in Mount Tabor."

"My motto is 'Always help a lame dog over the fence.' I may be unfortunate myself, some day."

"You are a brick, Wilder, and I will see you again sometime, but, for now, I must bid you adieu. When you get that mound open, you may report your luck, if you will."

With these words Don Sombrero turned his horse, but, just then, a strong gust of wind swept upon them, and in a moment more his hat went flying from his head and his mask was turned half around.

Wilder, standing near him, had a brief glimpse of his face in the gloom, but he whirled the mask back into place hastily, and without another word, rode toward where his hat had fallen.

Once there, he swung over the side of his horse, Indian-fashion, picked it up without pausing, adjusted it on his head and rode away at a pace which was soon increased to a gallop.

Wilder was standing like a statue, nor did he move until the road-agent had disappeared in the darkness.

"Good Lord!" he then muttered, blankly. "Am I dreaming or drunk? I could almost swear that was the face of Theodore Rivers, but—"

He paused, and then stood silent again, staring toward where Don Sombrero had been last seen like a man who had seen a ghost.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE ASSASSIN.

It was several minutes before Wilder recovered his mental equilibrium enough to reason calmly, and when he did reason it was only to be plunged deeper into perplexity.

He had seen the face of Don Sombrero, and, if it had not been so wild an iden, he would have been sure of his identity. Surely, it had been like Rivers's, but it was preposterous to think the Cavalier could be the road-agent.

"He is proud and rich, of noble blood and spotless reputation. Why should he play the road-agent? Don Sombrero has developed no trait except a passion for gold, and Rivers is fairly rolling in wealth. It could not have been he."

It was a firm decision, but in the face of it came the evidence of his own eyes and his opinion changed.

"By my life, I am not mistaken. I saw his face, and, under any other condition, I would be willing to swear it was Rivers. So, where is there room for doubt? Wild as the idea may seem, I know it was the proud ranch-owner!"

And then he fell to wondering what could be the motive which had led the Cavalier to such a course, but he failed to find a plausible one, and he was still buffeting his brain when a canine howl from the yard stirred him into sudden life.

"The infernal dog, by thunder! I'll levant before he plays the cannibal on my legs. I'm not the tiger-tamer of this circus."

He beat a hasty retreat and went on toward the village, but before the place was reached a voice behind him pronounced his name, and he turned to see Theodore Rivers hurrying after him.

"What's in the wind now?" he muttered.

"I want to speak with you, Abe," said the Cavalier, as he joined him.

"My ears are open."

"You remember that picture of the so-called Di Vernon?"

"Yes."

"I have at last obtained a clew to the girl's present whereabouts. She is in Thornton."

"Good enough."

"I have been working through a man I put on the track after her flitting, and I have every reason to hope she will return to Mount Tabor to-morrow. If it is so, do you suppose money will open her mouth and give us the truth?"

"Wal, I reckon it will, though I don't know her mettle. If it should prove so, it would blast Mr. Roberts, Esq., like a mornin'-glory."

"I seek only truth and justice, but if Roberts is as guilty as I think him, I want it publicly known."

"He is a p'ison serpent."

"Can I have your services to-morrow?"

"Sartin."

"Then remain at the Casino and I will see you there early in the forenoon."

After some further conversation the Cavalier said good-night and walked away toward his residence.

Wilder looked after him with a puzzled expression.

"He never breathed a word about the Don Sombrero business, and he was as cool and matter-of-fact as though I had not seen his face. By Judas! the man stumps me completely. Can it be I was mistaken? Bah! I know better; it was surely Rivers. Now I think I see his object. He dropped on me now to see if I suspected him, and my manner led him to think the contrary. That is the way of it."

Meanwhile Rivers was walking homeward in a thoughtful mood.

"I must get this sheriff off the track at once and then push my work. My money is getting at low ebb, and if I go to any one to borrow, they will suspect that Theodore Rivers is not such a millionaire as they think. Hang the luck. I fear I shall have to break my resolution to stick to honesty and make a raise by some means or other."

Thoughtful as was his mood, it was not his nature to go about like one wholly in a dream. He had led a wild life in the past, and this had taught him the imperative necessity of caution, so when a soft footfall sounded behind him, he wheeled with a quickness due more to habit than apprehension.

The movement, however, saved his life, and the man who had crept up behind him with a knife raised for deadly use found himself balked and discovered at the same moment.

He would have sprung forward, but the frowning muzzle of a six-shooter stared him in the face and he wisely paused. Rivers recognized him, too, for he was the man whom we called "Jonathan" in a previous chapter, a man so often seen with Ben Braxton that those who knew one knew the other.

"What are you doing?" the Cavalier sharply asked.

"Nothin'," Jonathan muttered.

"You were about to stab me. Why was that?"

"Don't be tew inquisitive," the ex-New-Englander answered.

"Just as you say, but I am not inclined to let this matter rest here. You want my blood, and you can have it if you are a better man than I am. Shall we fight?"

"Yes," was the prompt reply.

"When and where?"

"Now and here."

"Name your weapon."

"Bowies, by ther Etarnal."

"So be it. We will fight. If you win, you will accomplish your object. If I win, I shall get rid of a man who may try again to stab me in the back."

"That's the checker," said Jonathan, who had the strongest faith in his own prowess. "Let's go outside these trees where the light is better, an' then we can cut an' slay tew eour heart's content."

Rivers agreed and returned his revolver to his belt, but he had little confidence in his companion and, as they walked side by side, watched him keenly but secretly.

It was well he used the precaution, for Jonathan was not a man to be trusted anywhere. He had come out that night for a settled purpose and he wished to execute it, but he did not propose to run any risk of harm to his own precious skin if he could avoid it.

He had thrust the bowie back in his belt, but, as they walked on, he secretly drew it again and prepared for a treacherous stroke.

Then his hand swept round toward Rivers with a vicious thrust, a blow intended for the Cavalier's heart, but the latter coolly thrust out his own hand and caught the assassin's wrist.

"Dog!" he then hissed, "you have lost your chance. It is now life and death between us."

And in a moment more the two were clasped in a gladiator-like embrace, swaying about in a struggle which meant death to the vanquished.

Jonathan had expected an easy victory, but he was not the first man who had misjudged the caliber of the white-handed Cavalier. He found his efforts opposed by steel-like muscles and unexpected agility, and every attempt to free his wrist or obtain a fall was fruitless.

"I am your master!" Rivers exclaimed.

"You lie! I will kill you yit," Jonathan panted.

The Cavalier suddenly released his hold on his wrist, only to close like a vise on his knife-hand, and in a moment more the New Engander found the weapon wrested from his grasp.

"Yield!" Rivers said, with startling emphasis.

"Never!"

Then he was forced back rapidly, but he gained a new idea. He snatched a revolver from Rivers's belt, cocking it quickly, but it was the signal for his own doom.

His adversary recognized the critical state of affairs, and, with all his power, he plunged the keen bowie into the would-be assassin's breast.

Jonathan bounded like a stricken buck, the revolver fell from his grasp, and, even as the blood spurted out over Rivers's hand, the fellow seemed to fade to lifeless clay in his grasp.

Despite his hold, Jonathan slipped to the ground, and then, standing over him, the Cavalier realized that he had received his last hurt.

"It is a fate of your own choosing," he solemnly said, as he dropped the fatal knife.

"I am a dead man," Jonathan gasped.

"Doubtless you are right, but I wish you a better end."

"Oh!" groaned the thwarted wretch, "what a mad fool I have been. I have been led on to my ruin, an' I shall never see New England again."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ACCUSATION.

The last words which fell from the dying man's lips impressed Rivers strongly.

"Who has led you on?" he quickly demanded.

Jonathan aroused to new life.

"Ha! yeou would like tew know, wouldn't yeou?"

"Certainly, I would. If there was any one behind you, it is upon them, not upon you, my vengeance should fall."

"It is tew late," groaned the dying man.

"Nonsense! I will care for your wound and you will come around all right."

"Let me alone. Your knife went deep, and my life is about gone. I am sorry at this late day that I hev lived sech a life, fur there are them who would be sorry that I should die like a murderer."

"I will do all I can for you—care for you now, and, if you are really fatally wounded, send word to your friends."

"No, no; not fur all the world. They must never hear from me ag'in. Let them think, as they think neow, that I died when the schooner, Mary Jane, went down. But I thank you all the same, an' I'll do one good deed afore I die. Yeour life is menaced by a man who is high an' mighty in Mount Tabor, an' it was he who set me on."

"What is his name?"

"Sheriff Roberts."

"I am not surprised."

"He offered me a hundred dollars tew kill yeou, but I little knew the kind o' a man I had tackled."

"Why does he hate me so?"

"I reckon it is because yeou go so much tew Judge Austin's, but I don't know. Oh! I am going fast!"

Jonathan pressed his hand on his breast, and Rivers would have given much to have had witnesses there at that moment. Enough had been said to confound and overthrow Roberts, but proof would be lacking to confirm Jonathan's confession.

As though in answer to his silent prayer, voices just then sounded from the roadside, and, at his call, two men came to the spot.

They proved to be two exemplary citizens of the town, and a brief explanation excited their interest in the case. Jonathan was failing fast, but he managed to tell, plaiuly and remorsefully, how Roberts had hired him to kill the Cavalier, and there was no longer a lack of proof.

The stricken wretch soon expired, his last words being an indistinct murmur about "New Bedford" and "the Mary Jane," and in the far-off land of gold went out a life which had once, perhaps, been prized and unsullied in a happy New England home.

At that moment, Sheriff Roberts was seated in his private room, face to face with his devoted companion in crime, Ben Braxton, and on the official's hang-dog visage was a look of amazement.

"It can't be," he declared.

"But I tell yer it kin. I see'd Don Sombrero go inter ther grove, an' no one come out until Rivers rode away on the same identicle black boss. Then, when I went inter ther trees, nobody was thar, which proves that Rivers is ther road-agent."

"But why should he play such a game?"

"I reckon he is a humbug anyway. Like es not, he ain't got a penny ter his name, and he lives by what he gits as Don Sombrero."

"In that case, I have him on the hip."

"Sartin you hev, an' it only needs a whisper ter put Judge Lynch on his track. Then a rope will soon eend his career."

"The whisper shall be sounded, but I want him securely in the net first. He must be nabbed with his disguise on."

"You forget Jonathan."

"So I do, but maybe he will fail. I hope so, for, in that case, I'll save my hundred dollars and secure a sweeter revenge."

"I reckon Jonathan won't fail. He is in dead 'arrest, an' nobody kin use a knife any neater."

"Rivers, Don Sombrero! By Judas, I wish I had suspected it before. He should have swung before this late day. Now, I see why we have been so baffled in our work. He has been right among us, and all he had to do was to whisk off the cloak and hat, and Rivers, the immaculate, was before us. Devils alive; I have been a blind fool."

"You are sure o' triumph, now."

"So I am. See here, Ben; meet me at the Casino at ten to-morrow, by which time we will know whether Jonathan has succeeded."

Braxton gave his promise, and soon after left the house, while the sheriff, in his exultation, proceeded to swallow a swimming glass of whisky.

That night he slept but little, and the early hours of the following day were passed in watching for Jonathan, who had promised to call and report his success, but no Jonathan came, and the sheriff was left to wonder why it was so.

A little before ten o'clock he left the house and walked to the Casino to keep his engagement with Ben Braxton. Everything was as usual about the exterior of the saloon, and he entered to find a score of loafers distributed picturesquely around the various tables.

None of them seemed pleased to see him, but, after a sweeping glance which showed bini Braxton had not yet arrived, he went to an unoccupied table and called for a glass of strong liquor.

Unknown to him he had been watched and followed from the time he left his own quarters, and when, a little later, a dozen new-comers entered together, he did not suspect their visit concerned him, though he did wonder to see Mayor James in the crowd, and the sight of Rivers by his side was not pleasing.

Evidently the Cavalier had escaped Jonathan and still stood high with the best people of Mount Tabor.

He scowled a little as his rival and the mayor came straight toward him, but the latter nodded genially and they sat down together.

"We have been looking for you, sheriff," said James.

"Meaning you and—"

"Mr. Rivers."

"Well, I am here," Roberts curtly said.

"I am glad of it, for we have business in hand. Mr. Rivers, what is first on the programme?"

"I want to speak of the picture of the girl called Di Vernon, which was found at Arcadia in such a way that it appeared to have been

presented to me by her. You remember the circumstance, don't you, Mr. Roberts?"

"Yes."

"Well, the mystery is solved at last."

"Indeed?"

The sheriff was looking keenly at the Cavalier, but the latter's face was so calm and pleasant that he could not believe any trouble lurked behind.

"Miss Di has been found, and she has made a full confession."

"What does she say?" Roberts tersely asked.

"Simply that you were the cause of the whole trouble."

"I?" said the sheriff, in seeming amazement.

"Yes, sir. She says you came to her and offered her fifty dollars to sit for her pictures and, afterward, to write upon the back of one this pretty inscription: 'Theodore, from his loving Di.' She says furthermore, that you afterward gave her money if she would go away from Mount Tabor until the affair could blow over."

"It is a base lie!" cried the sheriff.

"She is willing to back her statement under oath."

"Who would believe her? Not you, mayor, surely."

"Why not?"

"Is her word to be taken against mine?"

"Well, to be frank, Roberts, it looks to me as though you have been playing a very nice game on Mr. Rivers with the intention of getting him out of your path by some means or other. You have been jealous because he dared look at Laura Austin, and you at once set about the work of destroying him."

A look of righteous horror was on Roberts's face.

"Good-Heavens!" he cried, "do you believe this thing of me? Mayor James, Rivers—I am innocent; I swear it. You must think me a base wretch."

"That's about the size of it," James dryly admitted.

"And all on the strength of a lie told by a woman who knows no such word as honor!"

"That isn't all, sir," the mayor answered, with a gravity which troubled Roberts.

"What more is there?" he demanded.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SHERIFF'S DOWNFALL.

THE plotter began to feel somewhat ill at ease. He noticed that many of Rivers's friends were at hand—Joe Pike, Cheerful Abe and others—and that they were bestowing frequent and secret glances upon him.

"Another step in your iniquitous career," Mayor James calmly said, "has been told us by the man known as 'Jonathan.'"

Roberts changed color. Strong-nerved as he was, he could not face danger from such a quarter with a stoical face, and the blow came unexpectedly.

"What of Jonathan?" he managed to ask.

"He is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is that to me?"

"Much, since he met his doom in trying to carry out your orders. You sent him to murder Theodore Rivers, but he tackled more than he could carry and got his last hurt instead of your hundred dollars. He made a clean breast of the whole business before he crossed the divide."

"Do you mean that he tried to implicate me?" the sheriff demanded.

"That's the size of it. He told how you hired him to murder Rivers, and there are three witnesses to his confession."

"He told a base lie," was the hot reply.

"I wish I could believe you, but the evidence is too strong on the other side."

Roberts was like a wolf at bay. He fully realized the seriousness of his position; he saw that public opinion, so far as the affair was known, was against him, and all his schemes and honors seemed tottering to their very foundation, but he was not one to yield tamely.

He made a desperate attempt to turn the tide; for it was imperatively necessary that the mayor should not think him guilty, and after asking for particulars of Jonathan's fate, he launched into a stream of eloquence. He set his own reputation and public position against Jonathan's well known vicious ways, but James dashed cold water on his hopes by reminding him that the dead man had always been his friend and associate.

"You can have a chance to plead your case before a bar of justice," was the mayor's ultimatum, "but for now, it is my duty to put you under arrest."

"You forget that I am the sheriff of Mount Tabor," was the haughty retort.

"I forget nothing," James calmly said.

"Mayor, this is a plot to ruin me. You do not know this man, Rivers, as I do. I can whisper a word in your ear which will astonish you."

"What is it?"

"He, Theodore Rivers, is the infamous road-agent, Don Sombrero!"

He looked Rivers full in the face, expecting

to see him blanch, but saw instead a calm, almost amused, smile.

"That is too ridiculous," said James, impatiently.

"I will prove it if you will give me a chance."

"How?"

"I hardly know how, but if you had not forced this premature charge, I would have brought him to you with his disguise on before three days. My eyes have been opened to his guilt, and I would soon have had him on the hip."

"It is not yet too late to put in your evidence," said the Cavalier, quietly. "I am as anxious as any one to have Don Sombrero unmasked, and I give you leave to tell all you know."

"His charge is a lie made out of whole cloth, of course," said James, impatiently. "It is not to be considered for a moment. Now, then, Mr. Roberts, will you yield yourself a prisoner?"

The baffled plotter hesitated for a moment, being tempted to use his revolvers in an attempt to effect his escape, but the number of his enemies convinced him it would be suicidal and he resolved to make the most of a bad matter.

"I shall not resist the law, if so it is to be regarded, but I propose to clear myself of these vicious charges and live to confound those who would ruin me. Here are my weapons, Mayor James."

He laid his revolver and knife upon the table, and the mayor, who saw that those of the crowd who were not in the secret were staring curiously, arose and said:

"You will be put in the inner room for now, for I have business to do here. In half an hour we will take you to the jail, where you will be safe if a lynch-law spirit should be developed."

Roberts smiled bitterly at the thought of himself occupying a cell to which he had often consigned some unlucky wretch, but he submitted quietly when, after a conference with the keeper of the Casino, he was locked in an inner room to await the pleasure of his captors.

The mayor had seen that there was considerable murmuring among the frequenters of the place, among whom the sheriff had many friends, so he at once mounted a table and made a speech in which he explained why Roberts was thus humiliated.

Public opinion is a fickle thing at best, and, in important cases, the majority of men like to go with the tide, so, as the speaker went on, the low-spoken words began to change to mutterings against the prisoner.

"It's all right," said Joe Pike, to cheerful Abe, as he noted the mood of the audience. "Ther mayor is knockin' all ther props out from under Roberts, an', when he is through, you can't find a sympathizer fur him in ther crowd. It is like some o' ther scenes I see'd in '49."

"Oh! I reckon his day o' glory is over. Villainy shall only flourish fur a season, anyway, you know, an' he has had a pretty fa'r run."

"How say you, gentlemen," said the mayor, as he finished his oration, "do you, or do you not think me justified in seizing the sheriff?"

"You have done right."

"He has be'n a wolf in sheep's clothin'."

"I always thought him a pesky rascal."

"Give him a quick trial an' a stout rope."

"Don't give him a trial. Let Judge Lynch take a holt on him!"

These and other cries arose from the fickle crowd which had swelled rapidly in proportions, but the mayor felt called upon to combat the last proposition.

"No, no," he said, quickly. "Don't talk of Judge Lynch in Mount Tabor. We have a tribunal of law here, and by it the man shall be tried. Let us rest content until then."

"He don't deserve a trial."

"Every accused man deserves one, whether guilty or innocent. Let us bow to the majesty of the law."

"Yes," added Rivers, "we must give him a chance, and I, most of all, desire that he have a complete one. He has accused me of being Don Sombrero, the road-agent, and I do not want him to go out of the world until he has proved his charge or failed in the attempt."

No more open opposition was made, but the Cavalier saw the men whispering among themselves, and advised that the prisoner be conveyed to jail as soon as possible.

"What do you think o' Roberts's charge?" Joe Pike asked of Cheerful Abe.

"It is ridiculous," the leader of the Triad promptly answered.

"Of course it is. Rivers is a reg'lar nabob, an' it ain't likely he would go gallopin' round ther kentry as a road-robber. I reckon it war only a desp'r'te dodge ter turn ther tide ag'in' him."

"That's all," said Abe, stoutly; but he remembered the face he had seen by night and knew that if his testimony was added to what had been said it would place the Cavalier in a bad plight.

"I sha'n't speak, though, for I like Rivers, and I am sure he has some great object in playin' the road-agent," he soliloquized. "I used to tell the tattooed man that if people knew his

indelible marks were washed off every night they would raise a row, but the N. E. & C. coined money off of him, and the end justified the means."

Meanwhile the mayor was mustering the men whom he could trust as a guard, and with them formed in a solid body he prepared to take Roberts to the jail.

He unlocked the door and stepped into the inner room, but there he paused in amazement. The sheriff was gone!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PURSUIT.

THE men at the mayor's back were not long in discovering that something was wrong, and as they pressed forward to look for themselves a shout arose which was full of anger.

Their prisoner had escaped from under their very noses, as it were, and they were not in a temper to meet the discovery philosophically.

"Where has he gone?" the mayor blankly asked.

"Through the window, of course," Rivers answered, and he strode forward and pushed it open.

The distance to the ground was not over twenty feet, a leap any man would dare take for liberty; but there was more than that to be seen.

"He had outside help," he quickly added. "There is a ladder placed against the wall, which shows that some one helped him away."

"Who could it have been?"

"Let us rather inquire where he has gone. Get your men into the saddle, your honor, and let him be hunted down before it is too late."

The lesser lights of the party were shouting furiously over the escape, and Rivers and the mayor hurried back to the main room to find them acting like lunatics, while one of their number had mounted a table and was delivering a lynch law speech which was cheered to the echo.

Before order could be enforced, however, the door was dashed open and a man bounded inside in such a passion of excitement that the words he tried to speak were for a while indistinguishable.

Rivers, however, recognized him as Duke Dorval, the man-of-all-work of the Austins, and with a sudden fear tugging at his heart he strode forward and took him by the arm.

"Be calm," he said, "and speak coherently. Is anything wrong?"

His voice acted like magic on the man, and with a powerful effort he succeeded in speaking plainly.

"There has been murder done!" he huskily said. "Judge Austin has been shot by Sheriff Roberts and Miss Laura abducted!"

His words fell like a thunderbolt upon the crowd, and, amid the roar of angry voices from the men, Rivers turned to the mayor with a set face.

"It came from our revelation to the judge," he said.

"Yes, for it turned him against Roberts. What can we do?" the official blankly asked.

"Ride him down! I am going now."

With these words the Cavalier pushed through the crowd and made his way outside. His bay horse was tied not far away, and in a minute more he was in the saddle and galloping toward Arcadia.

Once, he looked back and saw a score of the men following, but they were soon distanced.

His mind was very busy as he rode. An hour before they had chanced upon Austin, and the mayor, contrary to Rivers's expectations, had told all that had been discovered concerning the sheriff, whereupon, the master of Arcadio wheeled into line, denounced the schemer and gave the Cavalier his hand.

"It was base ingratitude on Roberts's part to shoot a man who has been so stanch a friend to him, but he knows no such thing as honor. And so Austin is shot; fatally wounded, Dorval said. If he dies, my own schemes of vengeance fall to the ground, and I am not sure but that I shall abandon them anyway. I feel now how mean a thing is revenge, and I have only to withhold my hand to gain happiness instead."

He rode on until he reached Arcadia, and when he had seen a servant, Octavia soon came to him.

Her eyes were red and her lips trembled as she gave him her hand.

"This is a house of mourning, Mr. Rivers," she huskily said.

"I have heard a little from Dorval, but I would like full particulars before I take to the trail."

"You are going to Laura's rescue?"

"I am and with God's help, I will restore her safely to her home."

Then Octavia briefly told how the tragedy had occurred.

Judge Austin, on his return from the village, had told the family of the net being woven about Roberts and had declared that he should never cross their threshold again, but, half an hour later, the escaped prisoner and a man whom they recognized as Ben Braxton, dashed into the inclosure, and Roberts asked for

shelter, saying he was in trouble at the village and wanted to hide until the storm blew over.

Austin promptly refused to harbor him and began to upbraid him for his crimes, whereupon a stormy scene ensued, which ended by Roberts shooting his former friend.

Dorval and the dog were at hand, and the latter rushed at the assassin, but a second shot dispatched him, and then the two desperate men rode toward the gate.

As bad luck would have it, they met Laura, who had been alarmed while outside by the firing, and Roberts had at once seized her, and, accompanied by Braxton, taken to the mountain road and gone at a mad gallop.

They soon disappeared, and Dorval restrained from pursuing to care for his master. The latter was carried to his room, where he was still lying, calm but very weak, and it was probable that the wound was a fatal one.

A physician had fortunately been near at hand, and he was doing all in his power, but with little hope of saving his life.

Such was the story to which Rivers listened, and at its end he prepared to at once follow the abductors. He could do no good by remaining where he was, and prompt action on his part might save Laura from great peril and hardship.

He was soon in the saddle and galloping toward the mountains.

"This day marks a turning-point in my life," he muttered, as he went on. "I came to Mount Tabor to ruin Edwards Austin and his family, but fate has conspired to turn me from my dark purpose. From this hour I renounce my vows of revenge, and I will live only to be the friend of those I came to destroy. 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord, and I leave him to deal out justice."

He urged his gallant horse on, looking sharply about as he went for signs of the fugitives. For the first time since he knew Laura he gave way to the love he felt for her, and he had but one thought in his mind—to rescue her or die.

He was nearing Winship's mine when he saw a borseman advancing toward him, and a second look showed him to be Dick Meeker.

The miner had been riding rapidly, but he moderated his pace and the earth was thrown high in the air as Rivers pulled in his horse.

"Is anything wrong?" Meeker quickly asked.

"Yes. Sheriff Roberts has abducted Miss Austin. Have you seen them?"

"No; but one of the boys see'd him an' Ben Braxton ride up the mountain like mad with a female with them, an' I war so sartain summum was wrong that I was ridin' down to see."

"They have stolen her, Dick, and I am on their trail. Where do you think they have gone?"

"Right up the mountain. I say, squire, ef this is a free fight, let me go with yer, will ye?"

The miner looked very anxious, but Rivers had no idea of refusing the aid of so valuable a man. He promptly agreed to the proposal, and the two were soon riding on together.

Rivers briefly related what had occurred, and his ally interpolated numerous exclamations.

"Who'd a' thunk it?" he had the candor to ask. "Roberts has be'n the shinin' light o' Mount Tabor, an' I never see'd a luminary so cut short in a hurry as this yer case."

"Can we get more of Winship's men?"

"They are all in the mine, except Joe Pike, an' it would take half an hour to get them byer."

"We cannot stop. A large force will soon be on the track, but we must push on alone."

And so they hurried on until their horses began to breathe hard, but it was no time for delay. Now and then Meeker dismounted and ran along the trail, every time finding signs of the fugitives in fresh footprints, and they began to have some hope.

"I'll bet a pile o' dust they are headin' fur Aztec Valley," said Meeker, at length.

The idea struck Rivers forcibly. The valley and its wild vicinity would make as good a hiding-place as could be found, and it would be the first place of which Roberts would naturally think.

"If we come upon them, it will probably be a desperate encounter," he said.

"That's jest my best holt. Blood and glory are what I delight in, an' I'd like a game o' lead with Mister Roberts."

"Braxton is just as much to be feared. He is a desperate man, and he would not have aided Roberts to escape if he had not been heart and body in accord with him."

"Oh! you can't tell me anything about Ben Braxton. I know the varmint well. He is as low brutal a dog as ranges these hills, but I will say he is a dead shot an' brave enough in a fight. He would murder his own grandmother fur gain, an' he would pick us off as he would a pair o' buzzards ef he had the chance."

"Still, I don't think either of us fear him."

"You bet your life we don't, squire. My blood is sizzlin' fur a chance at him. That's only one man I hate wuss."

"Who is that?"

"Don Sombrero."

"You don't forget how he robbed you."

"I reckon I don't, an' I'll get square with him

some day. All I ask is ter hev him as nigh me as you are now, squire."

"He might be as near, perhaps, when undisguised, and you not recognize him."

"Don't you believe it. Why, I could smell the varmint ef he got so nigh," Meeker boastfully said.

Rivers made no answer, and they went steadily forward. They were fast nearing Aztec Valley, and the suspicion that Roberts was heading for there began to assume tangible form.

The Cavalier could not help contrasting this journey with his former one to the place. Then, Laura was with him, free, untroubled and happy; now, her father lay dying at Arcadia and she was a prisoner in the hands of a merciless enemy.

His reflection ended as Meeker announced that they were nearing the entrance to the valley, and, as they rounded a bend in the canyon they were following, both looked ahead to catch a glimpse of the "garden," as Dick termed it.

Then they abruptly pulled in their horses, for at the very entrance, they saw an unexpected sight.

It was Sheriff Roberts, on foot, with Laura held in front of him by one hand, while in the other he held a cocked and leveled revolver.

It was a welcome but rather confusing sight, for they at once realized that the desperate man intended to use his prisoner as a shield for his own villainous person, and, in that narrow way, he had a decided advantage.

"Hold up!" he sharply said. "If you try to fire or advance, you doom this girl to certain death. I hold the winning cards in this game!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TRIAD AT WORK.

IMMEDIATELY after the departure of Rivers on the trail of the sheriff, a party was formed of men who were mad for the fugitive's blood, but when they rode away, Horace Wilder remained behind.

"I ought to go," he muttered, "but they have plenty of good men and my single arm will not be missed. Still, I stay because I have other work, and I will at once proceed to hunt up my corners."

He looked for the other members of the Triad, and finally found them in the Casino, playing penny-ante as composedly as though nothing unusual had occurred.

"What luck?" he asked. "The Major leads me," said Diaz.

"Oh! dis yer chile understands how ter handle de painted pasteboards," the colored corner declared.

"I flaxed you yesterday."

"An' I am flaxin' you ter-day. Yah! yah!"

"Put away the little jokers," said Wilder.

"I want to confab with you."

"My ears are open," said the Major.

Diaz simply nodded, and Wilder, after a glance around to make sure no one could overhear them, went on in a subdued voice:

"It is time for the Triad to take to the war-path again."

"We are ready," Diaz promptly said.

"We shall never have another chance like this. The dog at the Arcadia is dead, and, with Judge Austin lying in such a precarious condition, there will be no watch kept for intruders. We can go as we went before, armed with ladders and spades, and we will soon have the mound open."

"Ain't it rayther rough ter tackle the job when de household is in mournin'?" the Major asked.

Wilder winced perceptibly.

"It is a durud mean trick," he acknowledged, "and I feel as cheap as a blind dog in a fight, but what can we do? We want to see the interior of that mound, and the only way is to strike while the iron is hot. We don't hanker for a row, because we don't want to hurt anybody, and I think there will be a clear field, tonight."

"You are right," said Diaz. "Of course, we will feel like sneak thieves, but we want the treasure."

"Dat am a fack," the negro admitted.

And so it was settled that that night make another attempt, and, after everything was arranged, Wilder left his companions.

"I wish I knew what is really inside that mound," he thought, as he went away. "I would feel meaner than a chicken-thief if I should get caught, but what won't men do for gold? If I could raise a good pile I could start a show on my own hook and roll in wealth and glory ever after."

The afternoon passed slowly enough and he was glad to see night approach, although he felt a nervousness not experienced in any previous effort.

He was at the rendezvous at the appointed time, with the rope-ladders, and his "corners" soon made their appearance, bearing three spades.

They passed from the village to the Austin ranch without adventure and were soon beside the iron fence.

Everything was silent and dark about the

inclosure, except at an upper room of the house itself, where a light shining behind a curtain betrayed the fact that there was the sick-chamber of the wounded judge.

Wilder felt a deep sympathy for the house hold, and, as he had said, it was with extreme reluctance that he prepared to enter.

"I hope we won't be discovered," he muttered, "for the excitement might kill the sick man outright. We are in mean business, anyway."

"Remember the treasure," said Diaz.

"I do remember, and we will go on."

A few attempts sufficed to fasten the books of the ladder to the top of the fence, and then the Triad entered as on the previous occasion.

Silence still continued, and they glided cautiously toward the mound.

The obstruction of iron and stone looked formidable, but their plans were all laid and, selecting the most favorable side, they plunged their spades into the soil together and began the work of digging under.

They worked in grim silence and with vigor, and, in a short time, a bank of earth began to arise behind them and a hole of corresponding size to appear at the foot of the stone-fence. The earth proved to be less compact than they had expected, and good progress was made.

Anon, the excavation began to extend under the fence and beyond, and then at last, it was sufficiently enlarged to permit them to pass through.

Once more they stood beside the mound, with only a thin deposit of earth between them and the treasure, and though little was said, they began to grow nervous and excited.

In an hour they would, perhaps, be rich men.

They attacked the mound with zeal. Fresh vigor was thrown into their work, and under the steady thrusts of their spades, another pile of dirt began to accumulate.

"Golly! I sweat like de dickens," the Major said, drawing his sleeve across his face.

"You ain't accustomed to manual labor," Diaz said, working steadily on and speaking thickly.

"Reckon I kin make de gold fly, dough, when me git it."

"We all can, my beloved corner," said Wilder, "we all can, but it is yet to be got. Work on, slaves of the needle, and trust to your good saints, if you have any."

Wilder's spade struck against something and he began to work more cautiously. A few spadefuls and he saw a white object glistening in the dirt, and he excitedly produced his dark-lantern and turned the slide.

As he had expected, he saw a fleshless bone, and the Triad ceased work for a moment.

"We are on the eve of a discovery," said the leader, in a tragical whisper. "Here is a skeleton to begin with, and the case opens promisingly."

"Caramba! Let us proceed," Diaz said.

They renewed their labors more methodically, and in a short time a human skeleton was uncovered and lay at full length, peaceful and harmless, but ghastly as a symbol of death.

"I think there is another beside it," said the leader of the Triad. "Work on!"

They obeyed, and in due time not only one, but two more human remains had been found. The three lay side by side, as they had been buried, and the grave-robbers made another pause.

"They are very like what we shall all some time be," said Wilder, "but they were of a race never seen by our people, and the ground has covered them for centuries. How strange it is that, in some cases, human remains will be preserved by some peculiarity of the soil, while in others, even our poor bones will soon crumble to dust."

"Seems like ter me I should rise up an' accuse my disturbers, ef I was dem," said the Major, who plainly felt a superstitious awe for the remains.

"It isn't the way of dead men," said Wilder, "and as these unknown people have slept calmly so many scores of years, I think we may safely trust them to continue docile."

"I don't see no gold nor trinkets," said Diaz, who was of a practical turn of mind.

"The treasure is underneath, of course. Let us place these bones carefully aside and dig lower."

The negro showed a reluctance to touch the skeletons, but his allies laid them out of their way and the digging went on as before.

Fresh excitement began to seize the members of the Triad, for, if a treasure was there, it would soon be found, and they had thought upon the subject until their faith was strong.

Surely, they must succeed.

Deeper and deeper yet they went, and every spadeful of earth was brought under the light of the bull's-eye, but neither coin nor precious vessel was found.

Wilder began to grow uneasy. He noticed that the earth had grown very hard, as though never before disturbed, and, though this might be due to the passage of so many years, he could not but begin to waver in his faith.

"If any treasure was buried here," he was

thinking, "it seems to me it should have been near the bodies, else, what use in burying it? I am not well up in the mound business, but it strikes me things are not as they should be. We be to the Triad if we are destined to be thwarted!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SPECTER AGAIN APPEARS.

THE grave-robbers had gone four feet below where the skeletons had been found, and, as Wilder looked up and saw the level three feet above his head, he suddenly paused and leaned back against the side of the excavation.

"My beloved corners," he mournfully said, "we are working a salted claim."

Diaz cleared his throat with a vicious wrench.

"Carajo! I believe you are right," he answered.

"Don't you think dar is any gold hyer?" the negro pathetically asked.

"Not a dollar, nor even a California bit. We have ha' our labor for nothing, for these skeletons were planted without any precious metal to take them through to the other world. I reckon their relatives gobbled every shekel they had."

"That is the English of it," Diaz tersely said.

The Triad stared at each other in chagrin.

It was a melancholy pause, but, at that moment, a mass of dirt rattled down into the hole and they looked upward suddenly.

What they saw made the Major drop on his knees in terror, and even Diaz grew less ruddy about the face.

At the top of the excavation was a white-robed figure, slight and spiritual of form, and it was not strange they believed a ghost had come to upbraid them.

Only Wilder beheld in calmness. He recognized the same creature in white he had before seen about the mound, and a stern resolve to solve the mystery assailed him.

Before the specter had time to make further move he sprang at the side of the excavation, and as a way of ascent had been carefully left, he was up in a brief time.

At his first movement the unknown had turned and fled, but as he reached the level he saw it vainly trying to pass the fence, having gone from instead of toward the hole by which they had come under.

One glance was enough to show him that he was in the presence of a creature who was no more ghostly than a woman, and in a moment his grasp was upon her arm.

She sunk at his feet with a pitiful cry.

"Mercy!" she gasped. "Mercy, for the Virgin's sake!"

Even then there was something familiar in her voice, and Wilder bent to peer into her face. As he did so he grew freshly amazed, for he recognized the girl of the outlaws' cave.

"Marah!" he ejaculated, in surprise.

Her head was suddenly lifted and she looked at him in bewilderment.

"Who are you who knows my name?" she asked.

"Don't you recognize me, Marah?"

"No," she answered.

Then Wilder suddenly remembered that he was wearing the outfit which made him "Cheerful Abe," and a faint smile crossed his face.

"I am Horace Wilder in disguise," he said.

"Praise the Virgin; but—but—"

"Marah," he suddenly interrupted, "why are you here?"

She turned slowly toward the excavation.

"I came to visit the grave of my kinsmen," she said, in a subdued voice.

"What?"

"It is here that my father and brothers, of whom I told you at the cave, were buried."

The whole truth rushed over Wilder and he stood dumfounded. They had not been molesting a mound of an unknown people, but the graves of outlaws whose names were yet well remembered in California.

It was like a dash of ice-water on his sanguine scheme, and, more than that, he was overwhelmed with consternation that Marah should have found him thus.

"You did not tell me they were buried here," he muttered, with shame.

"No, for I did not care to have it known. Few people, even among the survivors of my father's band, are aware of the truth. When he and my brothers fell into the hands of the Vigilantes and met their horrible death, they were buried here together. That was when I was a child, as I told you before, and I remained with San Antonio for protection. Every one seemed to forget the grave except me, but they were all I had, and I came often until the land passed into the hands of Judge Austin. Since then I have rarely ventured near the spot."

"Why did you come in white?" he asked.

She removed the ghostly robe before answering.

"I learned that Dorval, who guards the grounds, was superstitious, and it was my idea to make him think me a specter if I was seen."

Her part in the affair was now clear, but it remained for him to explain what he had done, and in such a way that she would not blame

him. It was a penitent, shame-faced story, but he managed to continue to the end.

After the three outlaws met their fate and were buried as has been told, people in general soon forgot about them; the members of the old Vigilante band died or went to other places; and when Edwards Austin found the mound on his land and leaped to the conclusion that it was the work of an ancient people, there was no one to dispute his theory.

Wilder had fallen into the same error, but his efforts had enabled him to open, not what he had expected, but an ordinary grave.

All this he explained to Marah, and, though she at times made remarks which added to his abject feeling, she freely forgave him when all was told.

The hopes of the Triad had ended in discomfiture, but Wilder felt that they had yet one work to do; the grave must be restored to its former condition before they departed.

Diaz and the Major had crept cautiously up the side of the excavation and were amazed to find the specter a thing of human form and substance, and when he explained matters to them they agreed to help him to the end, though plainly overwhelmed with sorrow at the result.

Fortunately, Marah had not seen the skeletons, so Wilder led her outside the place and found a seat where she could remain until their work was done.

Then the restoration was begun. Before, it had been a pleasure to dig, but now all was hard labor, and though they worked manfully it was without enthusiasm.

The outlaws' remains were placed in their old position, and, at the end of two hours, the mound had assumed its former appearance, except that the loosened earth could not be so compactly arranged as before and its top was at least a foot higher.

When the work was wholly finished, even to filling in the hole by which they had crawled under the fence, the three men joined Marah and all went outside the grounds. Near the road, Wilder paused and turned to Diaz and the Major.

"You will return to the village at once?"

"Yes, senor," the Mexican answered.

"Then I shall not see you until to-morrow. My faithful friends, I regret that we should have been so disappointed, but it is the way of the world. The fat woman of the N. E. & C. has often said in my presence that this world is but a one-horse show, to man's confusion given. We have found it so, but we will face the storm. To-night, the work of the Triad ends, but we are not much poorer than when we began."

"Golly! I couldn't very well be dat," the negro said.

"Caramba! nor I," Diaz added. "As you say, senor, we have met with ill-luck, but we may thank our patron saints that our skins are whole and trust to the future for better success."

"You have been faithful to the glorious cause," Wilder continued, "and my blessing is yours, my faithful corners. Now, I have business to transact, and we may as well say good-night."

They made fitting responses and went carelessly away, but Wilder looked after them more soberly. To them, the parting seemed but that of a few hours, but he believed they were taking a last farewell. Rude and ignorant as they were, and unscrupulous to a certain degree, they had been true friends to him, and he wished them well.

He watched until they disappeared in the darkness and then turned toward Marah. She was looking at vacancy with a fixed expression on her face, but he at once went forward and took her hand.

"You are deep in thought," he softly said.

"Yes," she almost curtly said. "I was thinking of the future."

"Can you read it well?"

"I can read nothing. To-night I am about to leave Mount Tabor and begin a new existence. I came here for a farewell visit, and now that my work is done, I have only to go."

"What of the band?"

"It is broken up and the men scattered, temporarily, if not for good. There is no one to lead them now, and this region is becoming too thickly settled for their old work."

"Is San Antonio dead?"

"No, but his end is near. The Sheriff's bullet made a fatal wound, and it is only a question of a few days when he shall die. He was carried from the cave after the fight by his men, and, in some refuge of which I know nothing, his life is slipping away."

"I suppose you lose a good friend in him."

"He was kind to me, but his death scarcely hastens my purpose. I am tired of the life I have led, and, in some place where I am unknown, I will begin life anew."

"Marah, it is not right that you should go alone."

"I am strong and brave of heart," she steadily replied.

"Even a brave woman needs a protecting arm."

"I shall try to be my own protector."

For one moment Horace Wilder saw the plan of his past float before him; that past in which he had aspired to win Viola Austin for his wife because of the wealth she would bring to his spendthrift band; but the vision floated away again. That was only a dream, while this girl beside him appealed to his noblest impulses and his heart. She moved him as no other woman ever had, and he did not hesitate.

"Marah," he earnestly said, "if you will let me be your protector and shield you will make me a happy man. Become my wife, and I will do all in my power to guard you from the storms of life. Do not look upon this as an empty offer, for I love you as I never before loved woman, and it is for you to say whether I shall be happy or miserable."

Her face was not easily read in the darkness, but her voice was unsteady as she answered:

"You forget that I am an outlaw's daughter." "I forget nothing. I, too, have my failings, but I have no heavy sin on my soul. I value you for yourself, and in asking you to be my wife, I am sure I shall never repent my choice."

"Our acquaintance has been brief—"

"It has been long enough for me. I only ask that you will give me as much affection and trust as I give you."

"I do give you both, fully."

Her voice quivered now like that of one who has torn down a barrier of self-control, and in that voice and in the upturned face he read enough of her woman's heart to satisfy him.

He held out his arms and she crept into their embrace with a sigh of infinite relief. It was a courtship strange as California itself, but from that hour their new existence began.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

TWILIGHT of that same evening fell upon interesting scenes in other places than in the immediate vicinity of Mount Tabor. The shadows, following fast on the heels of the departing sun, descended on a hut which stood on the mountain side some distance south of the village.

Inside the hut a man lay battling with shadows deeper than those of an earthly light—the shadow of approaching death.

He lay stretched upon a couch made of pine boughs and the skins of wild animals, a rude bed even for a well man, but no murmur escaped his lips. One glance showed that he had once been a man of great physical power, for his body and arms were large and muscular, but the destroyer of man had fastened a relentless grasp upon him, and his face plainly told that the struggle of life was about over.

Great as the change had been; it was still easy to recognize in him the once famous outlaw, San Antonio.

When he had been shot down by Sheriff Roberts his men had managed to carry him away and to the hut, and there, with only one man left to watch over him, he was flowing dying from the wound he had received.

His companion, lying flat on the ground, was looking moodily out into the shadows when the chief broke the silence. He spoke in a deep, hoarse voice, but with perfect calmness:

"Rolle, come here," he said.

The man turned his head quickly.

"What is it, captain?" he anxiously asked.

"I want the truth from you now. You have told me to battle bravely against my hurts, and I have obeyed, but, instead of improving, I have steadily failed. I feel sure that I am making a vain fight, and as you have skill and experience in such matters, I want you to tell me frankly what my condition is. If I was a weak woman there might be sense in deceiving me, but San Antonio is not to be treated as a child. Rolle, am I a doomed man?"

Even with so long an address to set him right, the man hesitated, but his leader made an impatient movement.

"Speak!" he impudently said.

"Since you command it, I will. Captain, I can see no hope of ever again following you to victory. Your wound is eating your life away, and in a few days the end must come."

It was plain talk, but the iron face of the outlaw did not blanch. Instead, it was marked by a look which almost seemed like gratification.

"Enough!" he said, in the same hoarse way.

"I am sorry to bear such news, but I thank you for your frankness. I have held my life in the hollow of my hand too long to trifle at the nearness of death. But how long, Rolle, can I live?"

"Possibly a week, but not longer."

"What would be the result if I was moved from here?"

"You would not live a single day," the man hastily said, with a look of alarm.

"Still, I must go."

"Impossible!"

San Antonio smiled grimly.

"Look you, Rolle, I start for Mount Tabor inside of an hour," he firmly said.

"For Mount Tabor?"

"Yes."

"Are you mad, captain?"

"No, but I scarcely wonder that you think me so. Still, you ought to guess my object."

You know how I was brought to this pass and whose hand did the work. You know that Sheriff Roberts has been my ally for years. He has in many cases pointed out the spoils and I have gained them, after which he received a generous share. Through all I have dealt fairly with him, even while my word might at any time have hurled him to ruin. The men of Mount Tabor thought him an angel when he was a devil. I repeat, I have dealt fairly with him, but what has he done for me? He has given me the wound which is sapping my life away, and while I die like a wild beast in his lair, he thinks to go on in his brilliant career among his admiring friends. Think you, Rolfe, that I will allow this?

"It is, indeed, hard."

"It would be if there was no redress, but there is. I am going to Mount Tabor to hurl him from his proud position."

Excitement had given the robber fictitious strength and his voice rung out more strongly. The face of his follower was grave, but he felt that it was useless to oppose him in such a mood.

"I have warned you as to the result," he said.

"Can I hope for more if I go? Once in their hands I must either die or hang. When my story is told, the sooner death comes the better, but Sheriff Roberts shall go down to the grave with me."

Rolfe said no more. His chief had but expressed his own sentiments, and, as it could make a difference of only a few hours, it was, perhaps, best that it should be so if San Antonio had the strength to withstand the journey.

On this point the latter had no doubt. The excitement and his iron will would carry him through, and once in Mount Tabor his story could soon be told to Mayor James.

Having arrived at a decision no time was lost. Two horses were secreted not far away, and he dispatched Rolfe to bring them to the hut.

When they came he managed to walk outside with the aid of his follower, but the latter had to lift him bodily into the saddle. Then Rolfe mounted and the journey was begun.

San Antonio's face was ghastly and it was evident that he suffered great pain, but no murmur escaped his lips and he kept his seat far better than had been expected. Every motion while descending the mountain gave him great pain, but he shut his lips until his beard made one even vail and spoke no word to show it.

When the plain was reached he breathed a sigh of relief, but even then he dared not attempt a pace faster than a walk. All his energies must be saved or he would die before the town was reached. So he drank deeply from the flask of brandy and they went on slowly.

Rolfe watched closely to see that his leader did not grow faint and fall from his saddle, but while he watched he was not forgetful to himself. He had more cause to fear a visit of Mount Tabor than San Antonio. So far as man could see, he was not menaced by speedy death like his chief, but if he fell into the hands of the villagers he might yet come to the rope's end.

The thought was not pleasant, but, knowing San Antonio as he did, he felt sure his old captain would not ask him to dare such a peril and went unquestioningly on by his side.

In this way they went slowly along the intervening distance and steadily approached the town. The wounded man still held out better than could have been expected, but Rolfe knew it was a fictitious strength which would vanish all at once when their destination was reached.

They were getting too close to that destination for Rolfe to feel comfortable. He watched closely on all sides, expecting every moment to see some foe spring up by the way, and his nervousness did not long escape San Antonio's sharp eyes. The latter, however, had never intended to drag his faithful friend into danger, and as they emerged into the mountain road he pulled up his horse.

"We part here," he calmly said.

"Here?"

"Yes, here. Of course you must not go to the village unless you want to swing, and I am near I can now reach the place unaided."

"But, captain—"

"Not a word, Rolfe. I know your devotion, your goodness of heart, but this matter does not admit of a choice. There is but one way—you must now turn about and ride rapidly to safety. As for me I will go on to the town and do my work. Here, Rolfe, we, of course, part forever. Your work under my banner is done, and I am almost done with life. I part from you with regret, for you have been a good and true man, but the decrees of fate are inexorable. Comrade, farewell!"

San Antonio held out his hand, and Rolfe clasped it while tears rushed to his eyes.

"All good wishes for you, captain," he said. "You are my best friend on earth, and I would give my right arm to save you."

"Useless, Rolfe, useless; but you can do one thing."

"Name it."

"Promise to hunt down Abner Roberts if he escape, my vengeance."

"I swear it, captain."

"Good. Now, once more, farewell!"

A warm pressure of the hand on the part of each, a heavy sigh from Rolfe, and the work was done. He wheeled his horse and rode away, not daring to look back, and the darkness had soon concealed him from view.

San Antonio did not long watch him. He knew that only prompt action would take him to the village in time, for already he was faint and dizzy, and he must reach Mayor James before he died.

So he rode on down the road, and was nearing the outskirts of Mount Tabor, when he saw two men approaching from the rear. They were on foot, but, at so good a pace were they going, they steadily gained, and he conceived the idea of asking their aid. He had begun to fear he might faint by the way, and they looked hardy and strong.

He hailed them as they came up, and they promptly advanced to his side.

They were strangers to him, but the reader has seen them often before—they were Pablo Diaz and Major Jones.

"Will we aid you?" Diaz repeated, as San Antonio made known his request. "Why, certainly we will. How did you get hurt?"

"A revolver did the work," answered the chief, resting his hand on the Mexican's shoulder. "You shall hear all at the village, but I am now too weak to talk."

"There is a good deal of shooting around here of late," the representative of the Triad observed. "I suppose you have heard of Sheriff Roberts's little affair?"

"No; what is it?"

"He has done some wholesale murdering and skipped the town. There is a big search party out after him and he is likely to stretch hemp."

"Is this so? Tell me all about it."

Diaz obeyed and San Antonio listened attentively. Perhaps, after all, his sacrifice had been made in vain, but he would not turn back. Whatever was to be the end of Roberts, the Mount Taborites should know their idol as he was.

They went slowly on, to and into the village, Diaz and the Major wholly unsuspecting of the fact that they had so renowned a robber in charge, and San Antonio not at all disposed to tell until the proper moment.

As they passed they went within a few paces of a man who paused and looked at them fixedly, but they went their way without suspecting in what a state of wonder they left him.

"Thunder!" he muttered, "what does all that mean? Why is San Antonio, the outlaw, going to Mount Tabor? Judging from appearances, he is not a captive of those two men, but I cannot see why he should boldly seek the town. Perhaps he wants to confess before he dies, for it is evident his life-sands are about run out. Ah! there has been a great change since Judge Austin and I fought the robber and his men that night. Then the judge was strong and well; now he is near death's door. So, too, is San Antonio, who was then in the flush of his power. I am the only one of the trio that is left in good health."

The speaker stood like a statue and gazed after the three, but his thoughts were still busy.

"I have changed as much in that time at they, but not for the better. Then my hands were free from crime and I could look any man in the face. Now I am a branded outlaw, with a price set upon my head, and I am not sure I shall ever be any more. Oh! what a bitter lot is mine, when fate pulls me in two ways as once. Now, however, the struggle is over, and if I can to-night do the work I have marked out all may yet be well. To-night I ride as an outlaw for the last time."

Casting aside all thought of outside matters, he strode on until he neared a grove of trees near the road. Entering, he went at once into utter darkness, but he knew the way well and did not pause until beside a spreading tree.

There a strong black horse was tied to a branch, and man and brute met affectionately.

Then the former unrolled a package which had been secured to the saddle pommel, and a big hat and cloak lay beside him. He placed both upon his person in proper position, and then, to all appearances, Don Sombrero and his black horse stood side by side under the trees.

Carefully the man looked to his weapons, his face stern and set; and then, swinging into his saddle, he rode from the grove.

"Once more, old boy," he said, addressing the horse, "and then I hope our work will be ended. Let us look for our victim."

And out into the night went the pair, horse and master, the hat and cloak conspicuous as ever. *Don Sombrero was on his last ride!*

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DON SOMBRERO'S PLEDGE.

At about the same time that the Triad began their work, Octavia Austin sat watching beside her brother's bedside in the house.

A great change had taken place in the judge's appearance. Before his injury he had been strong, hardy and full-colored, but as he lay in bed, his face was pale and there was every evidence of approaching dissolution.

Now that the first excitement was over, he was perfectly calm, and had it not been for Laura's trouble, he would have had little regret to express.

The physicians had probed in vain for the ball, but it evidently mattered little where it was. From the moment Roberts fired the cowardly shot the result had been apparent, and he was awaiting the end bravely.

He called to his sister after a long pause.

"Octavia," he said, "I am going to ask of you what you will think a strange favor."

"You have only to speak, Edwards," she replied, caressing his hand.

"Are you brave?"

"I think so."

"Dare you go to the acorn grove, with Dorval for a guard?"

"If you wish," she answered, promptly, though plainly very much astonished.

"I do wish it, for there is something there which I wish to obtain. Go to the largest tree of the grove and dig two feet beneath the ground on the southern side. There you will find two articles, which I wish you to bring to me."

"It shall be done," she said, arising. "I will call Viola to watch with you while I am absent."

"No, no," he said, quickly. "I wish to be alone, and no one must know of your errand except Dorval."

She bowed to his will, though most unwillingly, and went in search of the man-of-all-work.

The latter made no objection when called upon, but like her, he was surprised at the request. During his service with the family, he had never seen any sign that the judge was insane or particularly eccentric, but this mission seemed tinged with both elements.

He secured a spade and lantern and they left the house. Passing through the gate, he relocked it behind them, and they went on toward the grove.

Octavia shivered as she followed the servant. The night was dark and gloomy, and their errand and the scene she had just left were not less so. The night venture was too obscure and uncanny for her liking.

The grove was reached without adventure, and the specified tree easily distinguished. Then Dorval struck a light, and while Octavia held the lantern, began his strange labor.

After a few shovelfuls of earth had been removed he plainly saw that he was digging where the dirt had been recently disturbed. It lay too lightly for the state of nature, and he rapidly enlarged the excavation.

"I am nearing the required depth," he said.

"Work carefully, then, and examine every spadeful," Octavia answered, deeply interested.

A few minutes of silence ensued, and then Dorval began to hesitate.

"I am below the required point and shoveling dirt which has never been disturbed before," he said.

"Perhaps what we seek has been thrown to the surface unseen by us. Let us look over the earth already handled."

It was done, but not so much as a pebble was found, either there or where he afterward dug.

He suddenly paused and looked Octavia in the face.

"There is nothing here," he said.

"Perhaps we have mistaken the tree."

"How can that be? This is by far the largest in the grove, and this dirt has surely been shoveled before."

"How can we do now?" she blankly asked.

"Nothing, except to go back."

"It will be a great disappointment to my brother."

"I don't see any help for it. There is nothing here."

"Where can they have gone?"

"If there was ever anything here, somebody has done the resurrection act ahead of us. It may have been an outsider, or—the judge himself."

"How could that be?"

"Perhaps he is a somnambulist. It would be no stranger than that he should bury anything here."

They conversed for several minutes longer, but, as they were powerless in the matter, finally decided to return to the judge. Perhaps, with more definite directions, they would be more successful.

Leaving the grove, they started toward the house, but only a few yards had been traveled when Dorval suddenly paused and grasped his mistress's arm.

He had made a discovery, but she was not much behind him and both saw, a few paces away, a black horse upon which was sitting a man who wore a big hat and cloak which at once revealed his identity.

"It is Don Sombrero!" Dorval exclaimed.

"Do not fear: I have a revolver and I fear no man living."

It was no vain boast, but Octavia scarcely heard him. Her gaze was on the road-agent. Strange emotions were assailing her and she felt a curious mixture of fear and confidence,

but, before more could be said, Don Sombrero spoke quietly:

"Have no fears, my friends, for I am not here with evil intentions. Miss Austin, I dislike to delay you at this moment, but I would like a few moments of your time."

"Do not agree, Miss Octavia," Dorval said, hastily, "or we shall have another abduction. Leave this man to me."

"No," she answered, firmly, "I will talk with him. Even if he should attempt mischief, your revolver is still in your hands."

She walked toward the road-agent without awaiting a reply, and, though Dorval groaned inwardly, he kept his place and contented himself with keen watching.

"I am glad to see you still trust me, Miss Austin," Don Sombrero quietly said.

"I trust that events will not shake my faith in you," she answered.

"So far as I can control the future, I swear that no harm shall ever come to you through me. Believing as I do that you are the noblest of women, it would be an everlasting blight on my manhood if I proved so worthless. That is a strange remark for an outlaw, isn't it?"

"Why will you use such a term?"

"It is the one applied to me in the placard at the village."

"He who wrote it is himself now a fugitive from justice."

"I know," Don Sombrero quickly said, "and you have my sincerest sympathy in your affliction. I have strong hope, however, that Miss Laura will be safely rescued."

"She seems to be singularly unfortunate."

"It is so, but, were it not for the condition of her father, I should have faith to believe a brighter day at hand."

"My brother is mortally wounded," Octavia sadly said.

"I am sorry for you all, and I know from experience just how hard it is to bear. Now, pardon me, but I would like to know for what you were searching in the grove."

Octavia hesitated, and then he continued:

"Was it for a pistol and a cigar-case?"

For a moment the lady was uncertain how to act, but, yielding to a sudden impulse, she told how and why she had been sent to the grove.

"Perhaps I can throw some light on the subject," the road-agent quietly said. "I believe Judge Austin desires the articles I just named, and, if you will take this package to him it may save him from worrying."

He partially unrolled the package, showing a pistol and cigar-case, but she hesitated.

"Why take them when they are not the originals he wishes?"

"They are the originals. Nay, do not ask me to explain now, but merely accept my word and carry them to him. Do not mention me, or say that you found nothing in your search, but, my word for it, he will be satisfied."

"I will do as you say, though I am deeper than ever in perplexity."

"You shall soon have an explanation, not only of this mystery, but of that which hedges me in. Inside of a week, perhaps of a day, Don Sombrero will unmask, and you shall know him as he is. Then, perhaps, you will curse him and the hour we met, but I hope for a different result. Be that as it may, the career of the road-agent is over. Your face has saved me from crime, Octavia, and I bless you with all my heart."

His voice was passionate and tender, and the lady knew not what to say. She felt that, with her proud ancestry, she ought to rebuke this outlaw, but it would be a grand thing to save a human being from ruin, and she knew that, in her heart was an echo of the tenderness she read in his manner.

What she said she scarcely knew, but Don Sombrero realized that time was rapidly passing, and he soon bade her adieu and rode away toward the road.

She watched until he disappeared in the darkness, and then, followed by Dorval, returned to the house, but the man asked in vain for an account of what had been said.

A few minutes later she laid the pistol and the cigar-case in her brother's hands, and she knew by the sudden lightening of his face that there was no mistake.

"They are back again," he murmured, looking at them intently, "but I cannot realize why I wanted them."

She did not answer, and he turned them over several times, and then turned toward her suddenly.

"Octavia," he said, "these things have a history, a tragical one, and I am going to tell it to you."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT BAY!

WE left Theodore Rivers and Dick Meeker at the end of a previous chapter just as they had come upon Roberts and his prisoner, and had halted at his command.

Both the would-be rescuers were wise enough to see that the sheriff meant business, and the way in which he held Laura prevented them from using their own revolvers upon him.

On Laura's part, her face was paler than

usual, but there was no evidence of cowardly fear, and their purpose did not suffer a material check, confident as Roberts appeared.

"We were looking for you, sheriff," Rivers said, not knowing what else to say in the peculiar state of affairs.

"Well, you've found me, haven't you?" the assassin retorted.

"I reckon we have."

"Having found me, what do you propose to do about it?"

"We propose to take you back to Mount Tabor, either alive or dead."

"Good! You are talking to the point, which is a thing I like. I will do the same. You want to rescue this lady, but you can't have her. I hold this pass, and, if you advance, I'll bore you full of holes until a coroner could never sit on your remains."

"Do you propose to hold the pass against all Mount Tabor?"

"I am talking with you, and with you alone."

"S'posen I see fit ter put in my bugle voice?" said Dick Meeker. "S'posen I see fit ter cover your stake! This is a free kentry, an' I am a naturalized voter. Where is ther mule-eared sheriff that kin bridle my tongue?"

"Don Sombrero and a fool!" cried Roberts, derisively. "You are a fine pair of knights errant!"

"There are more fools than ther gods ever made," said Meeker, dramatically. "See byer, Roberts, I know you well. You are a durned cunnin' cuss, but you dassent fight a 'skeeter. Jest say whether you'll settle this circus by tacklin' a man like me."

"If you want a fight you must come to me."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Laura, "I beg that you will not sacrifice your lives for me. The man, Braxton, is in the valley behind us, and he carries a rifle. Woul' it not be well for you to await reinforcements?"

"Listen to the oracle," laughed Roberts, hoarsely. "This is a war of words. Who speaks next?"

Rivers stopped the miner as he was about to speak.

"Say no more, but keep your place quietly. The villain will soon tire of his position."

"I wish we had a lasso."

"We have not, so we vill not discuss the matter. Roberts is bold enough now, but this affair will soon end against him. I have an idea. Suppose that I remain here while you make a *detour* and gain the rocks above his head. This would soon drive him to pastures new."

"That's ther proper caper. Keep your eyes open, squire, an' you shall soon hev returns from ther back counties."

The miner strode away to the left, and Roberts looked after him uneasily.

"What are they trying to do?" he muttered.

"You have only to wait and you will learn," Laura curtly said.

"Shoot me if I do wait. I'm not going to let them get the drop on me when I'm wide awake."

With these words he began to move slowly backward, keeping his gaze fixed upon Rivers, but the latter did not stir. It was not timidity that kept him quiet, but the knowledge that for the time the game was in Roberts's hands. Desperate as the latter's chances had become, he would not hesitate to shoot Laura if hard pressed, while a little careful work seemed sure to give the pursuers the vantage in the end.

So Rivers, without stirring, saw the two disappear behind a point of rock, and the sheriff turned to where Ben Braxton was standing beside the horses.

The ruffian did not look in a very happy frame of mind, but Roberts felt that he could be depended upon, and matters had come to a pass where his single arm was to be highly valued.

"We will get into the bushes," the leading villain briefly said, as he lifted Laura into the saddle of the nearest horse. "They can't see us in yonder labyrinth without getting mighty close, and if they try that we will make their way one of blood."

"Ain't thar but two on 'em?" Braxton asked.

"There may be others behind, but only Rivers and Dick Meeker are near us."

"All Mount Tabor will soon be howlin' about ther place."

"They won't take me alive," Roberts said, grating his teeth.

"I don't think they are particularly anxious for you to live," said Laura, sarcastically.

"Oh! they want me for Judge Lynch, I suppose; but they will be thwarted. My good luck is not going to desert me at this late day."

By this time they had reached the cover of the trees and the sheriff paused and looked back. His enemies were not visible.

"Their courage isn't equal to the demands of the occasion," he sneered. "I am not afraid of a score of such fellows."

"Do you really expect to oppose them successfully?" Laura asked, in surprise.

"Why not?"

"They will be in dead earnest after what has occurred."

"I do not fear them."

"And what, sir, do you intend to do with me?"

"Well, I scarcely know, except that I am resolved to have you to myself, come what may. I tried to win you fairly, but they would not allow it. Now, I'll have an unwilling bride if it is necessary."

"Do you think, Mr. Roberts, that I shall be like clay in your hands after I have seen my father shot down by your act?"

"I was driven to the deed."

"You speak falsely, sir. It was an uncalled for and cowardly deed, and if I thought his wound was serious, I would myself take your life now."

Her flashing eyes and set face showed how much in earnest she was, but Roberts only laughed. For the time, at least, she was powerless to do him injury, and he had always regarded her sex as creatures of utter weakness.

Braxton, however, turned his eyes away from her face with a gravity unusual to him. He and his leader stood opposed to all California in the struggle, and nowhere in the future could he see a gleam of light. In fact, the courage of the bully was beginning to waver, and he would gladly have been out of the contest.

"Can't we find a cave som'ers about hyer?" he asked.

"Why?"

"We can be surrounded whar we be an' this thicket is no protection. If we could git inter a hole in ther rocks they couldn't get us out easy."

There was reason in what he said, and as Roberts remembered the cave found by the exploring party, he resolved to at once take to its shelter. It was large enough to give quarters to them and their horses, and the entrance was so narrow that it could be held against a large force.

Acting on this idea they turned and rode through the bushes toward the cliffs. No one appeared to oppose them and the further side of the valley was soon reached, but here occurred a new difficulty. The way was then steep and rocky and it seemed impossible to get the horses up to the mouth of the cave.

Roberts went in advance with Laura, it being his intention to place bonds on her ankles as well as on her wrists when once in the refuge, while Braxton devoted his attention to the horses. They were hardy animals and accustomed to mountain work, so that they responded to his call far better than he had expected, but he was in a vicious mood when nothing could satisfy him.

"Come up hyer, you durned galoots!" he muttered, jerking at their bridles. "Climb, curse you, or I'll brain you whar you stand. You took me up hyer an' inter this trap on ther dead jump, an', by ther Lord, I'll make ye go furder or hev your skins."

There is nothing laughable in the rage of a man who values human life as a mere nothing, and Ben Braxton was not at that moment in a condition to attract argument from a reformer. Said reformer would have preferred to give him a wide berth.

But the faithful horses climbed steadily, and when the sheriff again appeared outside the cave he was delighted to find them at the door. They were persuaded to go inside and to the further side of the place, and then Roberts sent Ben to watch the entrance while he went over to where he had left Laura.

CHAPTER XL.

HEMMED IN.

"I AM sorry to have had to bind you thus," Roberts said, with some little signs of shame, "but it was a work of necessity. To make amends, I will now free you from all your bonds."

While speaking he was busy with his knife, but Laura remained silent until the last cord was cut away. Several times during the past few weeks she had been subjected to rough treatment, but it had only served to show her heroic nature and she had reached the point where all was received with outward composure.

"It is no wonder they called you a good sheriff at Mount Tabor, since you are so skillful at handling prisoners," she said, sarcastically.

"My genius has only begun to shine," he answered, with remarkable lightness. "I'll make those pilgrims from the town think me a Napoleon before I am done with them."

"In the meanwhile, what will you do for food?"

Roberts's smile suddenly vanished. Until that moment he had not thought of that most essential feature of a siege, and it was a question which perceptibly damped his ardor.

"We have plenty of horse meat on hand," he said, savagely, "and if the worst comes we can seize the men we kill and turn cannibal!"

Laura shuddered.

"I did not think you such a monster!" she said, in a voice of horror.

"I am only a man," he said, scowling. "What more is the milk-and-water creature you love? You think Rivers an angel, but I know him better than you. Girl, have you ever suspected the identity of Don Sombrero?"

Laura started slightly but her face remained calm.

"I am not a detective," she answered.

"I am, and I have not lived in vain. The mystery of Don Sombrero puzzled me for some time, I confess, but I ferreted his identity out at last, and only that my enemies got ahead of me I would before now have had him in custody. Girl, Don Sombrero and Theodore Rivers are one and the same person!"

Laura had expected the declaration and her face was under good control. At her heart she felt sick and unnerved, for had not her own eyes seen evidence to show that what he said was true? But she only laughed.

"Your charge is amusing," she answered.

"You do not believe it?"

"The charge is ridiculous."

"I have ample proof, and all I ask is a chance, and then I will put Rivers's neck in the halter."

"Your own chances for filling such a prominent position seem greater than his," she answered, with unwavering calmness.

"The end is not yet, my lady. Wait until you see what the future brings forth."

He arose abruptly and went to where Ben Braxton was watching at the entrance. The fellow lay gazing outside, his brutal face having an expression of thoughtfulness not common to his nature.

"Any signs yet?" Roberts asked.

"Nary sign," was the curt answer.

"They may not find us here."

Braxton looked at him in surprise.

"How kin they miss it?"

"I don't know, only I somehow feel that luck has not yet deserted me."

"You will think it has when you see the varmints howlin' outside. Rivers an' Meeker hev been byer afore, you say, and they ain't men ter forget so easy. Don't flatter yourself they won't find us. They will, an' then that will be a hot time on't."

"We have a good rifle and two revolvers."

"So hev they, ef not more."

"But we will hold this place against all they can bring against us."

"We'll try."

Braxton did not speak with much confidence. In fact, he knew that though they might do considerable damage before the enemy could overpower them, they would in the end be beaten; and he was wondering if Roberts was really in his right mind when he talked so lightly.

Their consultation was interrupted by a shout from outside, and looking in that direction they saw Dick Meeker and Mayor James among the rocks a hundred feet away.

"Lay low an' don't answer," said Ben, hastily.

The caution availed nothing, for Roberts at once sent back an answer.

"So you are thar, you 'tarnal critter," said Meeker. "I reckoned as how we would find you in this cave, an' I was right. Mebbe you see the mayor right byer wif me, an' mebbe you understand that all Mount Tabor is just below a clamorin' fur your blood."

"Let them clamor!" retorted the desperate fugitive. "I defy them and all the pack they can bring to their aid!"

"Look out for Judge Lynch!" shouted the miner, disregarding Mayor James's motion for him to remain silent.

"Let me speak now," said that official, stepping forward. "Abner Roberts, I see you are there and I want to speak with you."

"Go right in, your honor. I always listen when you speak, for your words are those of wisdom."

"I have come to demand your surrender."

"Then you may as well go right back, for you have not got any child to deal with now. If you try to enter here you come to your death. Keep away!"

"This is madness, Roberts."

"There is method in it, as you will find to your cost."

His bravado rather perplexed the mayor, but the demand for his surrender was firmly pressed. Of course Roberts defied him, and in the end the messengers disappeared, giving no clew to their plans for the future.

Then Roberts went back to Laura, leaving Ben Braxton alone.

"Things are gettin' too hot fur me 'round hyer," the ruffian soliloquized. "I reckon I had better skip. Ef I hang by ther flag I'll get wuss than Jonathan did, an' I don't hanker arter sech honors. One thing is sartain—ef I don't get away from Mount Tabor on ther dead jump I'm gone up. I'll desart this 'ere sinkin' ship while I can, skip back ter ther town, make a raise in some way, an' then rames. Roberts will make Rome howl, but I don't keer. He has outlived his usefulness."

He looked back to see that the sheriff was not watching him, and then cautiously arose to his feet.

Five minutes later Roberts, who had merely been to see that Laura did not attempt to flee into the interior of the cave, returned to the entrance to find the post deserted. Braxton had gone from sight and hearing.

A suspicion of the truth at once rushed upon

the hunted man. He remembered that his ally had been filled with fear of late, and as no other thing could have taken him away, it was very evident that he had deserted.

Roberts's face grew convulsed with rage and he ground out an oath from between his teeth. He could have murdered the traitor then with ardor. For a little while his bravado deserted him, and he leaned against the side of the wall in real weakness. Ben had taken the one rifle in his flight, so only a revolver remained with which to defend the cave.

"I'm afraid the game is up! What can I do against all those men single-handed? They are thirsting for my blood, and I don't see any hope of thwarting them; but, by the Eternal, I'll make some of them weep before they win the fight!"

The color came back to his cheeks with a rush, and he called Laura in a sharp voice. She came forward with a calmness which almost maddened him, and a new and dangerous light came into his eyes.

"You and I are alone in this cave," he said. "Ben Braxton has deserted."

"Luck is deserting you, Mr. Roberts," she answered.

"I believe you, but the end will be a bloody one. Look you, my lady, I have plotted too long to let my enemies have the fruits for which I have sinned. Theodore Rivers, road-agent and blackleg, shall never call you his. I swear that I will shoot you dead rather than see you rescued."

The glare from his eyes frightened her. Brave as she was, her heart sunk like lead. In his boastful mood he had seemed like one without power, but now he looked the very personification of a demon. He would murder her without a scruple, and his face showed that he believed the deed inevitable.

"When they press me too hard," he went on, sibilantly, "I will turn and shoot you in your tracks. Say your prayers, girl, for they will soon be needed."

"I am as fit to go to the hereafter as you," she retorted, rallying a little.

"Those who expect nothing can receive no less. I shall die with my boots on. Sit down on my right where I can watch you while I watch them."

She dared not disobey, but took the position indicated without a word. Her heart was thumping like a drum, and she seemed suffocating, but there were no symptoms of faintness.

Roberts crouched near the entrance, revolver in hand, and looked out on the shelf of rock beyond. If his enemies came it must be by that way, and his sure aim would drop the first man who showed himself.

Laura wished that she could see a way and had the courage to do something for herself, but she could not slip away unseen, and it would be folly to oppose her feeble efforts against those of her captor. No; she must wait and, unless some favorable chance appeared, depend on her friends to rescue her.

Her friends! The words seemed almost a mockery. Her father had been severely wounded—she was then ignorant of the fact that it was fatally—and she could scarcely acknowledge Rivers as a friend if he was indeed Don Sombrero.

Roberts noticed the thoughtful look on her face and scowled darkly.

"What mischief are you plotting?" he asked.

"None," she huskily said.

"I don't believe you, but it is all one to me. I will watch you like a cat, and, if I go down to ruin, you go with me. Ha! ha! we will make a bonnie pair to cross the dark river together."

Before she could answer he was again hailed from the outside. The call came in the voice of Mayor James, and, though the official did not uncover himself, he laid an elaborate offer before the sheriff. He proposed that Roberts should surrender Laura on condition that liberty be given him in return, but the offer was received with derision. Judging other men by his own small stock of honesty, the fugitive would not have dared to trust to the mayor's pledge; so he bluntly declared that he would neither surrender nor consider a compromise.

The conversation was protracted until Roberts grew tired of it, and even Laura wondered at James's persistency.

"He must think their case hopeless, or he would not be so anxious to make terms," she thought.

She made a mistake in thus thinking, as the sequel proved.

While the conversation was going on, neither the sheriff or his prisoner suspected that something of moment was transpiring just behind them.

Neither of them had seen the figure which, appearing first in the distant shadows, was cautiously creeping toward them—so secretly that not a rustle betrayed its advance—and neither suspected that a man with a revolver held between his teeth was taking advantage of the attention both were giving to outside matters to work his way nearer yet to the desperate sheriff.

If Laura had turned and seen this man, she would have recognized him as Theodore Rivers,

and it was just that fact which made the Cavalier so doubly anxious as he crept along. If she should chance to see him, her inevitable look of surprise could not fail to be seen by her captor.

Consequently, the would-be rescuer, as he wormed along, inch by inch, was far from feeling at his ease.

Luckily, Laura did not turn her head, and outside, Mayor James kept up his arguments persistently. He was doing the work marked out for him, and his words were still persuasive as Rivers drew so near that he could not but wonder at his success.

He could have shot Roberts where he lay, but he wanted to capture him alive. The law had a use for him.

The crisis came at last. Something caused the fugitive to turn his head quickly, suspiciously, but in a moment more he was beaten to the rocky floor by the Cavalier's full weight. The latter had launched himself on the villain just in time.

He gave a clear shout, as they went down together, but in a moment more he had other work on his hands. Roberts realized his peril, and twisting about, he grappled with Rivers like a maniac.

Laura had seen the Cavalier and recognized him just as the attack was made, but as she sprung to her feet she saw only a confused knot of human bodies and limbs, as they struggled desperately for the mastery.

She clasped her hands and stood for a moment like one turned to stone, but her presence of mind came back, and she ran through the entrance and began to cry for help.

Her efforts were not needed. The men outside had heard Rivers's own shout—they had been anxiously listening—and they came hastily along the ledge, led by Dick Meeker and the mayor.

Laura mutely pointed inside, and they rushed on with their weapons drawn. The first glance showed them they were not needed. The battle was over. Rivers was kneeling on the sheriff's breast, with one hand on his throat, and it was evident he was making the grasp a strong one.

Dick Meeker uttered a shout, but the sternness of Rivers's face did not change.

"Bind him, gentlemen," he coolly said, "and he is yours."

They obeyed with the dexterity common to bordermen, and then, as Rivers arose, Roberts looked up at them with a face which was like a demon's. He was indeed defeated and undone.

For once he had nothing to say. There was murder in his eyes, but he was as helpless as a child. Silently he saw the rescuers shake Laura's hand, silently he heard her thanks, but in every look he shewed his bitter hate.

When he took refuge in the cave he forgot that when Rivers had his adventure in the place on a former occasion, he had been washed out by the subterranean way into the valley; but his rival had not forgotten it, and he had come in this time as he went out before, greatly to Roberts's sorrow.

There was no further cause for delay, so Laura and their prisoner were escorted to the valley below, a mount was made, and all started together on the return to Mount Tabor.

All were going in triumph except Sheriff Roberts. He—Was he going to another turn in the tide, to the justice of the law or to Judge Lynch?

CHAPTER XLI.

DON SOMBRERO IN THE SADDLE.

THE country around the village was very quiet that night. Up in the mountains the captors of Sheriff Roberts were wending their way homeward; in the sick chamber of Arcadia Judge Austin lay dying, and down in the village itself men talked wonderingly of the events of the day. The fields and roads surrounding the town, however, bore no evidence of life.

Stay! The assertion has been prematurely made. At one point there were signs of life, but there had been none until a single horseman rode out of a grove not far from the ranch of Theodore Rivers.

His appearance was such as would at once have arrested the attention of a resident of Mount Tabor, for in the flapping cloak and broad-brimmed hat such a person would surely have thought he saw Don Sombrero.

Evidently it was the noted road-agent, for otherwise, the resemblance was remarkable. Not only did the hat and cloak go to confirm the idea, but the rider's face was masked and the horse he rode was a jet black.

He adjusted his outer garments as his horse moved away from the grove at a walk.

"I've played a good many games o' keerds," he muttered, as he went, "but this is ther most absorbin' o' all. I must make a raise inside of two hours, or I am in a box. This hoss will hurry me swift an' sure from Mount Tabor, but I ain't got a cent in my pockets an' it won't do ter act ther road-agent elsewhere. Ther sooner I get rid o' my old habits, ther better. Now, it would be jest my durned luck not ter make a strike, but I'll run ther resk an' thank my lucky stars ef any moneyed man gives me a chance. Arter to night I play Don Sombrero

and, from the time we first met, when boys of ten years, we were like Damon and Pythias, never quarreling, and sharing each other's joys and sorrows.

"In due time, both of us married, and when two daughters were born of my marriage and two sons of his, we often laughingly declared that they should marry when of proper age.

"Now comes the tragical part of my story. Ten years ago, Caldwell and I were one night on board a steamboat bound from Memphis to New Orleans. We had lived the usual life of Southern planters—one of conviviality often carried to excess—and on this occasion we had partaken of a good deal of wine.

"In this condition, we sat down to a table to play cards, and, for a while, our gayety was unbounded. Just how the change occurred I never knew, for the wine was all in my head, but James and I quarreled about some trifling matter and went from words to blows.

"Of course, with our hot blood and false notions of honor, but one result could arise from this, and a few minutes later saw us facing each other on the hurricane deck, pistols in hand, prepared to fight a duel."

Austin paused with a sigh which was almost a groan, and Rivers hoarsely said:

"Go on!"

"We fought, and he fell dead at the first fire. What followed I do not know, but I remember that, in my wine-madness, I exulted over my horrible work and acted like a demon. Oh! what a fatal night that was, and how I have suffered for it since!"

The judge pressed his hands over his hot forehead, while his listener sat with a face like marble.

"What followed is still more horrible," continued the dying man, "and I dare not dwell upon it. Caldwell's wife went insane, and she died two years later in an asylum. Her murderer, too, is on my hands. I was not enough of a man to make a move to aid my victims, and the younger son was taken to Texas where he had an aunt. The elder boy was at sea when his father fell by my hands, and, as he was never heard from again, it is supposed he perished there."

"It was an ill-fated family," Rivers huskily said.

"And I was their evil genius, their destroyer. But for me, all would have been well, but I made myself doubly an assassin. Now, Mr. Rivers, I will tell you why I sent for you. Do you think the boy who was sent to Texas can be found?"

"Very likely he can."

"Then, sir, I wish to have it done and one-half my whole fortune given him, that being all the recompense I can offer. Will you, Mr. Rivers, act as my agent?"

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE MASK REMOVED.

AUSTIN looked anxiously at his companion, but the latter's face was not easily read.

"Will it not be digging up old wounds to find this boy and tell him the story?" he asked.

"He can know no worse of me than he already knows, and, as for me, I would give a thousand dollars to have him by my bedside now."

"Why so?"

"In order to humiliate myself, to drag myself in the dust at his feet, as it were. I would not dare ask his forgiveness, but I would give much to see his father's son before I die."

"Then, sir," said the Cavalier, in a strange voice, "your wish shall be gratified."

"Impossible! I can not live until he arrives."

"You are mistaken, for he is even now in this town."

Austin started a little from his pillow, with an eager face, but quickly fell back again.

"It cannot be," he declared.

"It is so, Judge Austin, for I am Ralph Caldwell!"

A wild expression crossed the dying man's face.

"You?" he incredulously cried.

"Yes. Listen to me, sir, for I am speaking the truth. I am the younger son of James Caldwell, and the name of Rivers does not in any way belong to me. I came to Mount Tabor with my identity disguised for the express purpose of seeing you, and so the man you have so often harbored is the very one you now wish to see."

The judge passed his hands several times across his eyes and then locked fixedly at the speaker. Even in his weakness, his iron nerves predominated over all else, and, though nothing else earthly could have surprised him so much, he showed less excitement than would have been seen in the average man in health.

"I never suspected this before," he said, and, even now, I can see little of your father's looks. Your eyes and forehead are the same, but you are larger and stronger."

That is the result of my wild, out-door life in Texas and Mexico."

We need not dwell on what followed, but, in a short time, a complete understanding had

been established between them. The Cavalier did not think it necessary to tell how he had come to Mount Tabor for the sole purpose of seeking revenge on the man who had shot his father, only to be turned from his resolve by Laura's fair face, and, when the judge fully realized that he was James Caldwell's son, he clung to him as to a rock.

In a husky whisper he explained that the pistol on the table had been the one which shot his ill-fated friend, and that the cigar-case had been a present of their happy days together—articles he had always kept, though he knew not why—and then they were put away from sight.

"You make a mistake," said the Cavalier, anon, "in thinking that Walter, my elder brother, was drowned at sea, though I was myself of the same opinion until a few months ago. He has all these years been living a rover's life on the sea, in India, Australia and other places, but he returned to this country a short time before I came to California. He is now in Texas, and it is likely we shall soon meet again, though I was in his company only a few days when he first arrived."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and "Rivers" answered it to see Laura. She announced that a gentleman was at the outer door who wished to see him, and, while she took his place at the bedside, he went quietly down.

Opening the door, he saw three men, the first of whom was Duke Dorval.

Then he started with surprise, for, seated on a horse's back, was a man in a big hat and cloak—one he could not fail to recognize as Don Sombrero, and by his side, standing grimly erect, was Joe Pike.

"I've got ther creetur," the veteran abruptly said.

"How did you do it?" asked Rivers, as we will still call the Cavalier, in amazement.

"We met by chance, ther usual way, an' I proved ter hold ther trump keerds. He is tied up, hand an' foot, an', ef you say ther word, I'll let you see who he is."

"Do so."

Pike lifted the horseman's hat and mask, and the face of Ben Braxton was exposed. After deserting Roberts he had tried to "make a raise," only to fall into the power of the miner.

Rivers expressed his surprise, but the veteran soon interrupted him.

"I want ter see you one side," he said. "Dorval, will you guard ther prisoner?"

"You bet," was the prompt answer.

Pike and Rivers went a few rods away and then paused.

"Do you remember ther placard Don Sombrero posted in ther village, sayin' that ther was some rascal usin' his identity fur malicious mischief?"

"Yes."

"Wal, Braxton is ther counterfeit Don Sombrero, an' ther man who shot ther pilgrim in ther stage-coach. Shall I show you ther real an' only genuine Don Sombrero?"

"Yes," again said Rivers, his wonder increasing.

Pike had carried a bundle under his arm, and he now unrolled it. In a moment more he had donned a large hat, a cloak and a mask, and another Don Sombrero stood before the Cavalier.

The latter, however, was confused and uncertain.

"The road-agent was never before known to have a beard," he said.

Joe Pike cast off his hat and cloak, fumbled for a moment about his head and then his long, gray beard and hair were cast to the ground, and he stood before Rivers, a young and stalwart man of handsome face and form.

It was not that, however, which made the Cavalier cry aloud. Despite the change in his looks, he had recognized him.

"Walter!" he exclaimed.

"Brother!" answered the metamorphosed man, and their hands crossed in an earnest clasp.

The sons of James Caldwell had met again! Excited and earnest words were spoken, but Walter soon recovered his calmness.

"This is a profound surprise for you, I take it?" he said, smiling faintly.

"It is, indeed, and I do not understand—"

"What?"

"Are you the real or a counterfeit Joe Pike?"

"I think I am the only one of the name. So far as I know, no other has ever figured in or near Mount Tabor. My disguise was perfect since it deceived you, though the fact that we have only been in company for a few hours during all these long years is a sufficient reason why you did not recognize your brother in the whiskered Joe Pike."

"All that is true, but I have never until now suspected that you were in California."

"You need an explanation and you shall have it. You will remember that when we met in Texas and I learned what Judge Austin had done to our parents, I proposed an elaborate scheme of vengeance; and you will remember that when you opposed my plan because you had not the money to carry it out I declared that I

would from time to time furnish what was necessary.

"When you came here all your money went into yonder ranch, and then you began your work of torturing the family by refined cruelty. Thank heaven, not even the first step in that path of crime has ever been taken.

"I had said that I would remain in Texas, but I never intended to do so. I was maddened by our parents' wrongs, and, though I dared not tell you so, was resolved to raise money by fair means or foul, so that you might suffer no check for want of capital.

"By moving rapidly I reached California before you did, and came at once to Mount Tabor. On my way here I had an adventure. I had stopped at a hotel for the night, when I learned that San Antonio's band of robbers were about to pounce upon and go through a gentleman who had just left the hotel to ride by night to this town.

"I did not know who he was, but, resolving to aid him, I saddled my horse and gained the road ahead of them. I found their intended victim, and together we baffled them. When the danger was over I learned his name. Ralph, I had saved the money, perhaps the life, of Edwards Austin. He invited me to his ranch, but I declined, and we parted then and there.

"The night's adventure, however, gave me an idea. Road robbery seemed to flourish around here, and I determined to assume the role of an outlaw to raise money. Thus it was that I became Don Sombrero; but I found the work not agreeable to my conscience, and I have kept an account of every dollar taken, with the idea of refunding it at some future day.

"Since I was working secretly, even toward you, I had to assume some disguise in which I could trust myself while abroad by day, and it was this fact which gave birth to Joe Pike. A false beard and wig and a little dye to bronze my skin did the work, and no one has suspected that the old 'Forty-niner' was otherwise than he seemed, or that he was really Don Sombrero."

The Cavalier began to see more clearly, but it needed some further conversation to entirely clear away the veil of mystery.

"We are together in Mount Tabor," he slowly said, anon, "but, for my part, my vendetta is ended. Judge Austin lies dying in yonder house, and it seems like a horrible nightmare when I think of the dastardly course I intended to pursue."

Walter promptly held out his hand.

"Our vendetta is ended," he firmly said. "There is a spice of devil in every man's nature, and ours was running wild when we planned this work. Thank Heaven, it will never be carried out. But, Ralph, if Austin were as well as formerly, it would still be the same."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. We came here with evil thoughts in our hearts, for revenge is not for this world, but a spell was found which was slowly but surely casting out the devil."

"I think I understand."

"Two words will explain—Laura and Octavia. We met them, their goodness conquered us though we knew not of it, and we should have been saved in any case."

"You are right," said Ralph, thinking of the fair face of the girl he loved.

"We will talk of these things at a later day, for I have now other work to do. I'm going to take Ben Braxton to the village."

"For what purpose?"

"He stole my role of Don Sombrero for selfish ends, and it was he who shot the man in the stage. Now, I will deliver him to the authorities, and as he likes to play Don Sombrero, he shall shoulder all of that man's sins and meet a deserved fate. He has been a wholesale murderer, and he shall die as he has lived—by violence. Thus will disappear all signs of Don Sombrero."

The speaker picked up his false beard and wig, put them on and became once more humble Joe Pike.

"Go back to the house, Ralph, and do all you can for the family," he said, "and I'll take my prisoner to the village."

The following morning the Cavalier heard startling news. Judge Lynch had been abroad in the village, and two men had been hanged without trial. It was a shocking affair, but they were guilty enough, for they were Sheriff Roberts and Braxton.

Unexpectedly to himself, "Joe Pike" had conducted his prisoner, still disguised as Don Sombrero, straight into the midst of the mob that had seized Roberts, and the partners in villainy expiated their crimes together. Mayor James tried in vain to save them, but his sorrow at such lawlessness was somewhat lessened by the fact that San Antonio was not molested.

That noted road-robbert died in bed the following day, and it may be he was better at heart than many who had held their heads above him in life.

After the work of Judge Lynch, Don Sombrero was seen no more, and none of the villagers ever suspected there had been a flaw in their indictment of Ben Braxton. One man

would have had some doubts if he had remained in Mount Tabor, but that one, Horace Wilder, was journeying far away with Marah.

In a peaceful place a hundred miles away, the young people settled down to lead the new life they had mapped out when they joined their fortunes. Nothing could be more truthful than the assertion that they did wisely when they married, for, from that hour, luck smiled upon Wilder's endeavors to gain a manly living, and they are happy in each other's love.

Pablo Diaz and the Major remained at Mount Tabor, but from the hour when the Triad dissolved, the minor "corners" saw their leader no more.

Judge Austin died with all his family and both the sons of James Caldwell at his bedside, and, as none but kindly words reached his ears, he died happier than he had lived.

Walter freely confessed to the ladies he was the genuine Don Sombro, but there was no shadow in Octavia's eyes, and Laura, seeing how much the brothers were alike, did not wonder that she had once believed Ralph to be the road-agent.

The young men did not tell their real object in seeking Mount Tabor, and when Walter had managed to restore all the gold, secured during his career as a robber, he felt more at ease. They settled down in the town and devoted themselves to business with zeal, and when, in due time, Octavia and Laura became their wives, they considered themselves the most fortunate of men.

Viola, too, soon married a worthy man, and good fortune smiles on all the living of the house of Austin.

No outsider ever again showed a disposition to meddle with the mound, but, in course of time, it was removed from the grounds as an object scarcely ornamental, and the bones of the dead outlaws rest in another spot.

And as we approach the end of our story, peace and prosperity reign along the foothills of Mount Tabor.

THE END.

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